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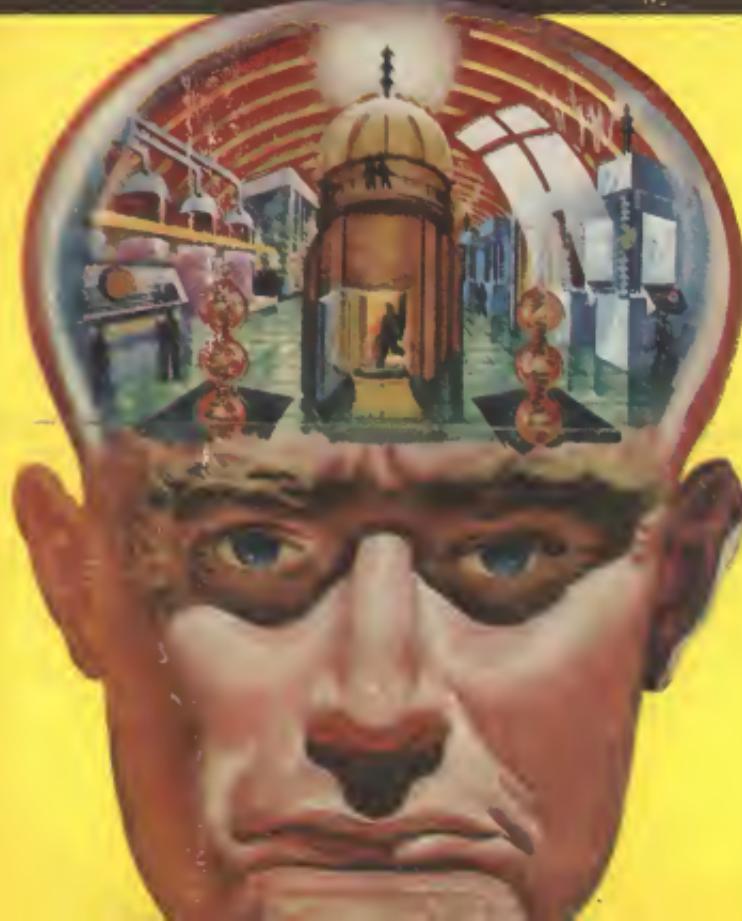
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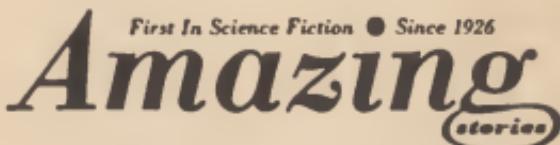
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FEBRUARY 1967

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TWO DAYS RUNNING AND THEN SKIP A DAY

By RON GOULART

Illustrated By GRAY MORROW

The next time you sprain an ankle or crack your pelvis, we hope America isn't just that much closer to the megapolitan nightmare depicted in this latest Ron Goulart postcard from the future. Otherwise, like young Roger Minton, you might find that the worst place to have a serious accident is in your own cosy little two-room apartment. Even though two-way television, private prescription outlets, and automated nurses named Kirkyard make home treatment so effective that your family doctor can devote most of his time to such things as getting ready for a costume ball—or even marching in the Fairplay for Venus parade!

When his wife caught fire, Roger Minton was in his den alcove with spools of data scattered on the work board. Making sure his cup of instant wouldn't spill on anything important, he pushed back out of the alcove and ran across the main room of their 2-room suite and into the kitchen cubicle.

He unseamed his tunic, got out of it and wrapped it around Nanet, whose robe was burning at the sleeves and up the front. She said something he couldn't catch and leaned against him. The flames were smothered. The air conditioner whirred on, sucking away the faint smell of singed hair and skin.

"I touched the defroster unit," said Nanet, her eyes closed. "Brushed it with my sleeve, caught fire."

"Damn Shenagher. I've told him that thing heats too hot." He unwound the tunic from his wife and looked at her arms. "Not too bad," he said.

She opened her eyes. "Like a bad tan. Hurts."

"I'll call Dr. Scattergood," said Minton. He guided his slender, dark-haired wife into the living area, resting her on the sofa.

Minton flicked the phone screen on and said, "Dr. Don Scattergood, Sector 48 of Greater Los Angeles, 520-4606-420." While he waited, he took a chewable tran-

quilizer out of his trouser pouch and put it in his mouth.

The image screen vibrated with lines that looked like a cartoon of an ocean, and then a plump blond man appeared. "Dr. Scattergood's Answering Bureau. Automated Nurse Kirkyard speaking."

"I don't want an android, this is an emergency."

Kirkyard touched his plump thumbs together. "What class of emergency?"

"My wife was burned."

"No, no," said Kirkyard. "Give me the number classification. It's in the booklet under your prescription slot."

Minton grabbed the book, turned to the B section. "26A, I guess. Yeah, 26A."

Kirkyard's left cheek wrinkled. "Mr. Minton, we can't accept guesswork, can we? Oh, listen, I'll tell you what. Hold your wife up to the viewer and I'll give a looksee."

"Okay." Minton helped his wife up to within range.

"Hello, Mrs. Minton. That's a striking robe, though a little worse for fire. Hurt much?"

"Yes," said Nanet, holding out her arms.

"26A indeed, Mr. Minton. That's no worse than 24B," Kirkyard's cheeks puffed and he gave a pursed smile.

"Put ice water on the burns. I'll send over some salve."



"You'll send?"

"Certainly."

"Don't I even get to see Dr. Scattergood?"

"What day is this, Mr. Minton?"

"Tuesday."

"And the time?"

"Around 7 p.m."

"Tuesday, 7 p.m.," said the android. "Dr. Scattergood's on his panel show. If you want to see him, tune in Channel 32."

"It's him I want to see me," said Minton.

"Put ice water on the burns. Use the salve twice a day for two days and then stop."

"Shall we come in to see Dr. Scattergood tomorrow?"

Kirkyard's head inscribed a circle. "Of course not. Dr. Scattergood's going to be working on his book tomorrow and marching in the Fairplay for Venus parade. Not to mention two major operations he's performing. Why he's so rushed he had to leave his picket signs parked under the operating table. It's operate and run from dawn to dusk."

"Just ice water? You mean, just the water we have right here?"

"You certainly don't think I'm going to send you water on your prescription outlet."

"Should I go to bed or something?" asked Minton's wife.

"Up to you," said Kirkyard, blacking himself out.

The prescription outlet whirred and rattled, and a tube of ointment dropped into the tray. "I never trust an android," said Minton, reading the label. "Especially a gay one."

"Rog, an andy can't be gay."

Minton grunted. "I'll get the ice water. If our refrigerating unit isn't on the fritz again."

"Ouch," said Nanet.

"You in pain?"

"Felt like saying it."

Minton went into the kitchen cubicle.

Norris Shenagher was dancing alone in the silent room. Beyond his window the towers of Greater Los Angeles showed gold and rose as the morning sun cut the somg.

Tapping on the open suite door, just under the Manager tag, Minton called out, "Oh, Shenagher."

The manager's elbows made zigzags and he kicked out his feet. On his head was a transistor cap. He spun, his shoulders clicking, danced toward Minton. "Steam beer," he said, unhooking his cap.

"What?"

"How would you like me to make Harding-Laguna Towers the first apartment complex in Sector 24 of Greater Los Angeles to have its own steam beer plant?" Shenagher was a wide, thick man with hanging black hair and a shaggy mustache.

"Where would you put a steam beer plant?"

"Basement, I was thinking."

"That's where the laundry facilities are."

"Don't be so obsessed with cleanliness," said Shenagher. "Let's have fun before the Venusians turn the Ray on us."

"I'm on my way to work. I wanted to tell you something."

The manager winced. "A complaint. It's a special Minton complaint."

"That damn defroster heats up too hot. It burned my wife last night."

"We're not liable for any injuries. Read your contract," said Shenagher. "How is the little lady?"

"She's all right. Are you going to fix the thing?"

"Minton, I put you on the list, didn't I?"

"Yeah, the waiting list and all I do is wait."

"That's clever," said Shenagher. "You write slogans that clever down at the Alch-Rustic Food Processing Company?"

"I told you I'm not in the advertising department," said Minton and held up his attache case and recorder. "I'm in turkey research."

"Gobble, gobble," said Shenagher, closing the door between them.

Minton's head jerked in anger, and he jammed a hand into his

tunic pouch. He looked at the handful of spansules he'd picked out, decided on an anti-depressant with a mild hallucinating component. Then he ran to catch the work tube.

On the entertainment screen in the shower stall Dr. Don Scattergood was driving up to the premiere of the Greater Los Angeles-Plastic Inevitable Opera Company's new season in an antique land car. Minton hoped he'd get a look at his doctor, but a naked starlet walked by and the camera followed.

The battery-powered soaping unit slipped from his hand and he bent, holding to the safety rail, to pick it up. The rail made a harsh yanging sound and came free of the wall. Minton fell forward, his hands whipping out to cushion him. He did a half somersault, came up to almost a standing position and then fell out of the stall, over the floor-level toilet and into the bath area.

"Nanet," he called finally. "Get me out of the bath. I think my leg's sprained. Or busted."

"How?" his wife cried, hurrying into the area.

"Shenagher again. I told him that rail was shaky."

Nanet caught his hands and helped him up to the floor. "Easy, Rog."

"Don't get your burns wet now, Nan."

"We'd better call Dr. Scattergood."

"He's at the opera."

"At ten a.m. on a Saturday morning?"

"Oh. I guess it was a tape I was watching."

Kirkyard parted his lips and sighed through his nose when he saw Minton. "Again, after only four days? You're a hypocondriac, Mr. Minton."

"I just broke my damn leg."

"You think you broke it. Let me see it."

"I want Dr. Scattergood."

"He's in the lab, and then he has to go out and rent a costume for the Animators' Ball. Hold up your leg."

"I can't move it."

"Oh, so," said the android.

"Can't we get an ambulance. An ambulance cruiser for him?" asked Nanet.

"Mrs. Minton, hospitals are for people who are seriously ill and for all those government-financed freeloaders. Even if Mr. Minton's leg is broken, I can't get him into a hospital."

"Well, get me a doctor."

"Look in your emergency book, Mr. Minton. A broken leg is only 14A. Now then, actually. Here's what I'll do. I'll send you some splints and bandages and things in your prescription slot. I think it is a broken leg you have, so this way I can instruct you and

your wife on how to set it."

"You're sure Dr. Scattergood sanctions this sort of thing?" asked Minton, tired of favoring one leg.

"How many broken legs have you had in your lifetime, Mr. Minton?"

"This is the first."

Kirkyard's mouth puckered. "This is my hundred and eighth. So I think, I honestly do, I know what I'm up to."

With the android's instructions they got the leg into a cast.

The second day of his sick leave Minton finally got Shenager on the phone. "All I've seen for two days is a plaid pattern," Minton said from his lounging chair.

"My kilts were hanging over the scanner," explained the manager. He was wearing a tight exercise suit and holding a fifty-pound weight in his big left hand.

"Kilts?"

"My costume for the Animators' Ball. What's with your foot?"

"I fell down in the hazardous shower stall."

"Harding-Laguna's not responsible. Read your contract." Absently he lifted the weight up over his head.

"Okay, but when can you come up and fix the railing? It came off the wall."

Lowering the fifty pounds

Shenager said, "Well, this is Tuesday morning. Thursday afternoon for sure, or Friday probably. Yes, probably Friday before my free-fall club meeting."

"Friday?" said Minton, sitting up. "I could fall down again by then."

"You're not going to take a shower with that thing on your foot."

"My wife."

"If you were a little handier, Minton, you could make a few repairs yourself. Like a man."

"At \$500 a month rent I don't have to be a handyman."

Shenager hung his kilts back up.

The desperadoes came on Friday afternoon while Minton was waiting for the manager to appear.

The buzzer grated him out of a doze, and Minton flicked the door toggle by his chair. "Yeah?" he said, blinking awake.

Two small men carrying an old fashioned steamer trunk were in the hallway. "Is the lady of the house in?" one asked.

"No," said Minton. "She's at work. She's a stenotaper at a binocular factory."

"Splendid," said the other small man.

The two of them brought the trunk into Minton's living room area, opened it and unpacked two battered blaster rifles. "This is a heist."

Minton tried to rise, was pulled back by the heavy cast on his foot. "No, you're kidding. Hard-ing-Laguna has an electronic anti-burglar system. You can't even get into this place."

"On the blink," said the nearest burglar. "We got a detector that zeroes us in on faulty alarm systems."

"Shenager again," said Minton.

The nearest said, "We specialize in appliances and recreational equipment. You tell us where it all is, and we'll conserve time all around."

Minto made an angry noise and tried to propel himself and his chair toward the men.

The further burglar yanked a blunt instrument out of his unseamed tunic and jumped. He chopped down on Minton's head, hard, several times.

Minton stiffened up, standing, corkscrewed half around and fell over his rowing machine.

For some reason they made all the android cops with red hair and freckles. Minton kept waving his hand negatively at the one on the phone screen. "I'm in no shape," he said in the late-afternoon apartment, "to make a report." He pointed with one loose working arm at his head. "I want a policeman to come over and help me."

The andy cop thumbed a deck

of punch cards, chose a yellow one. "Your building's covered by a fool proof alarm system. Nobody can break in, mister."

"Look at my head. Look how they took all our appliances, including my rowing machine."

"What's a cripple want with a rowing machine, mister?"

"This is just a broken leg."

"If you'd care to, mister, I can take down a statement and put it through processing."

"What's that mean?"

"That what you allege will be evaluated."

"Let me talk to the Chief of Police."

"He's busy putting up the bunting for the Policemen's Ball."

"Ahh," said Minto and blacked his screen. His stomach was spinning and flickers of light danced at the edge of his vision.

He called Dr. Scattergood's office. Before Kirkyard could speak, Minton shouted, "I've got a fractured head, Kirkyard. Put me through to the doctor."

"You never give up, do you, Mr. Minton?" Kirkyard's lower lip quivered with his sigh. "Step up here a little closer."

"If I take a step, I may fall over."

"Always malingering. Well then, turn your head to the right. No, to your right not mine. There."

"It's a fracture, right?"

"Not at all, Mr. Minton. Looks

like a concussion to me. Here now, close your eyes, and see if you can put the tips of your forefingers together."

Minton did it on two tries. "There."

"Just a concussion," decided Kirkyard, grinning. "Not worth all this fuss now, was it?"

"I want to go to a hospital."

"No need of that," said the android. "I'll send you some drugs and bandages, and you can patch yourself up."

"I don't think I can handle it."

Winking, Kirkyard lowered his voice. "Listen, Mr. Minton, if you keep this on the quiet, I'll also send you a couple of Dr. Scattergood's medical books. Then you can look up concussions and make sure you're treating yourself just right."

"Real medical books? Those are valuable. Won't he miss them?"

"To be truthful, Mr. Minton, he rarely has time to look at them. He won't miss a couple. Lord, we've got a whole wall of the things here. I'll pick you a couple of good ones."

"Do I go to bed?"

"Sit tight till the books arrive."

When Nanet showed up from work, Minton was in his lounge chair with a real leather-covered book on his lap. He'd bandaged his head himself, given himself a sedative, changed the cast on his leg and taken his temperature twice.

"What happened?" asked his wife, noticing the sparseness of the room and his new bandages.

"Tell you in a minute," said Minton. "I want to finish this page."

Minton got the surgical instruments by mistake. Kirkyard sent the wrong box over to him when he phoned in about his relapse. Now Mindon didn't bother to complain to Shenagher much. It was easier to stay in the lounging chair and read the medical books and study the instruments. His group medical examiner had taken a look at him over the phone and arranged a ninety-day paid leave. Lenzer, his immediate chief in turkey research, had sent over two containers of poultry findings, but Minton didn't feel up to studying the material. Nowadays his head rang in a skittering-in-the-walls way when he exposed himself to turkey material and data.

The Greater Los Angeles Weather Authority had never been able to control the Santa Ana winds, and in the fall they began to blow again, hot and red out of the desert. You could feel the wind stroking and worrying the view window, scuffling the glass.

Alone on a hot afternoon Minton was reading a puzzling part in his favorite medical book. He'd handled another household acci-

dent last week, a sprained wrist for Nanet, with a minimum of help from Kirkyard.

When the door buzzed, he didn't bother to open it.

"Minton," called the manager. "I'm here with my tool kit and gear to make your repairs."

"Okay," said Minton, letting him in.

"How's the leg?"

"Progressing nicely," said Minton, clearing his throat.

"And the head?"

"As well as can be expected."

"I'll tackle the bathroom first," said Shenagher. "Mind if I watch TV while I work?"

"Not at all." Minton had an anxious finger keeping his place.

In a few moments Shenagher said from the shower stall. "Isn't Dr. Don Scattergood your man?"

"Yes."

"He's in here on television dressed up like a fat lady."

"Oh?"

"Some tape news coverage of last night's Starving Waifs Banquet and Costume Ball. He's a little too tall but otherwise quite attractive."

Minton returned to his reading and didn't stop until Shenagher groaned. "Beg pardon?"

Doubled up Shenagher came into the living area. "Pains in my stomach all of a sudden."

"Rest on the sofa," said Minton. Using his chair as a support he worked over to the

slumped manager. "Just as I thought. Hold on." He got his medical kit from the closet and gave Shenagher a shot.

"Hey now, what are you doing, Minton?" Shenagher was pale, dotted with cold perspiration.

"I'm fairly certain you've got an appendix attack. I've given you a little something to put you to sleep."

"Call an ambulance. My Universal Medical number is," be-

gan the manager, then he sank back asleep.

Minton worked over to his utility table and picked up the case of surgical instruments. Placing them next to the unconscious Shenagher he looked up appendicitis in his medical books.

The operation sounded simple enough. He glanced at the phone screen, wondered about calling Kirkyard. It hardly seemed necessary. This time he wouldn't bother to ask for help. The End

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TUMITHAK OF THE CORRIDORS

BY CHARLES R TANNER

Illustrated By MOREY



Ever since August of 1965—when the first issue of the new Amazing came out—we've received many requests to bring back this or that old favorite from the early days of science fiction. And by and large those suggestions have proved more than helpful in guiding us to gems such as the following short novel—as good as early Wells, as fresh as the latest Zelazny—in which a boy thinks of the universe as an intricacy of dusty corridors, all of them so far underground that he's never even heard of something called the sun!

Tumithak of the Corridors, copyright 1931 by Teek Pub. Corp.

IT is only within the last few years that archeological science has reached a point where we may begin to appreciate the astonishing advances in science that our ancestors had achieved before the Great Invasion. Excavations in the ruins of London and New York have been especially prolific in yielding knowledge of the life that those ancestors led. That they possessed the secret of flying, and a knowledge of chemistry and electricity far beyond ours is now certain; and there is even some evidence that they surpassed us in medicine and some of the arts. Taking their civilization as a whole, it is quite doubtful if we have even yet surpassed them in general knowledge.

Until the time of the Invasion, their discoveries of the secrets of Nature seem to have been made steadily in regular geometric progression, and we have good cause to believe that it was the people of earth who first solved the secret of interplanetary flight. The many romances that have been written by novelists dealing with this time, testify to the interest which we of today take in the history of what we call the Golden Age.

But the present story deals neither with the days of the Invasion, nor with life as it was in the Golden Age before it. It tells, instead of the life of that semi-

mythical, semi-historical character, Tumihak of Loor, who, legend tells us, was the first man to rebel against the savage shelks. Although innumerable facts are still lacking, recent investigations in the Pits and Corridors have thrown much light on what was obscure in this hero's life. That he really lived and fought is now certain to be true; that he accomplished the miracles accredited to him by legend is just as certain to be untrue.

We can feel sure, for instance, that he never lived for the two hundred and fifty years that are ascribed to him; that his wonderful strength and imperviousness to the rays of the shelks are mythical, as are doubtless the stories of his destruction of the six cities.

But our knowledge of his life increases as our credibility in the legends decreases, and the time has come when we can grasp dimly, but with a more rational viewpoint, the truth about his deeds. So, in this tale, the author makes an attempt to rationalize, to place properly in its historical setting, the early life of a great hero who dared to strike boldly for Mankind, in the days when the Beasts of Venus held all the earth in thrall . . .

Chapter I The Boy and the Book

As far as eye could see the long somber corridor extended. Fif-

teen feet high and as many wide it ran on and on, its brown, glassy walls presenting an unvarying sameness. At intervals along the center line of the ceiling large glowing lights appeared, flat plates of cool white luminescence that had shone without attention for centuries. At intervals equally frequent, were deep-cut doors, draped with a rough burlap-like cloth, their sills worn down by the passing generations of feet. Nowhere was the monotony of the scene broken unless it were in some places, where the corridor was crossed by another of equal simplicity.

The passage was by no means deserted. Here and there, throughout its length, scattered figures appeared—men, for the most part blue-eyed and red-haired and dressed in rough burlap tunics that were gathered at the waist by wide, pocketed belts with enormous buckles. A few women were also in evidence, differing from the men in the length of their hair and tunics. All moved with a furtive slinking air, for though it was many years since the Terror had been seen, the habits of a hundred generations were not easily thrown off. And so the hall, its frequenters, their clothes and even their habits combined to complete the somber monotone.

From somewhere far below this corridor came the steady beat and throb of some gigantic machine;

a beat that continued unceasingly and was so much a part of the life of these people that it was only with difficulty that they could be brought to notice it at all. Yes its beat bore down on them, penetrated their minds, and, with its steady rhythm, affected all that they did.

One part of the hall seemed to be more populous than any other. The lights here glowed brighter, the cloths that covered the doorways were cleaner and newer, and many more people appeared. Sneaking in and out of the doorways they went, for all the world like rabbits engaged in some big business enterprise.

Out of one of the side doorways, a boy and girl appeared. About fourteen years of age, they were exceptionally tall for children, apparently having already reached their full growth, though their immaturity was evident. They, too, like their elders, were blue-eyed and red-haired; a complexion due to the eternal lack of sunshine and lifelong exposure to the rays of the corridor lights. There was a certain boldness and quickness about them that caused many of the folk of the corridor to frown disapprovingly as they passed. One could see that these older ones felt that the younger generation was fast riding to destruction. Certainly, sooner or later, this boldness and loudness would bring down the Terror from the Surface.

But sublimely indifferent to the disapproval that was so in evidence around them, the two youngsters continued upon their way. They turned from the main corridor into one less brilliantly lighted, and after traversing it for nearly a mile, turned into another. The hall in which they now found themselves was narrow and inclined upward at a decided angle. It was entirely deserted and the thick dust and neglected condition of the lights showed that it was long since men had lived here. The many doorways were without the draped curtains that concealed the interior of the inhabited apartments in the larger corridors; but many of the doorways were almost entirely covered with draperies of cobwebs covered with dust. The girl drew closer to the boy as they continued up the passage; but aside from this she showed no sign of fear. After some time the passageway grew steeper, and at last ended in a cul-de-sac. The two seated themselves in the rubble that littered the floor and presently began to talk in a low tone.

"It must have been years since men have come here," said the girl, softly. "Perhaps we will find something of great value which was left here when men deserted this corridor."

"I think Tumithak is too hopeful, when he tells us of possible treasures in these halls," answered the boy. "Surely there

have been men in these halls, searching as we are, since they were abandoned."

"Tumithak should be here by now," the girl said, after a while. "Do you think he will come?" Her eyes strove vainly to pierce the gloom down the hallway.

"Why, of course, he will come, Thupra," said her companion. "Has Tumithak ever failed to meet us as he promised?"

"But to come here, alone!" protested Thupra. "I should die of fright, Nikadur, if you weren't here."

"There isn't really any danger here," he said. "The men of Yakra could never enter these halls without passing through the main corridor. And many, many years have passed since Loor has seen a shelk."

"Grandfather Koniak once saw a shelk," reminded Thupra.

"Yes, but not here in Loor. He saw it in Yakra, years ago, when he fought the Yakrans as a young man. Remember, the Loorians were successful in their campaign against the Yakrans and drove them out of their city and into the corridors beyond. And then suddenly there was flame and terror, and a band of shelks appeared. Grandfather Koniak saw but one, and that one almost caught him before he escaped." Nikadur smiled. "It is a wonderful tale, but I think we have only Grandfather Koniak's word for it."

"But really, Nikadur—" the girl was beginning, when she was interrupted by a rustling noise from one of the web-hung doorways. Like a flash, boy and girl both leapt to their feet and sped in panic down the passage without so much as a single glance backward, totally unaware of the youth who had stepped from the doorway and who was now leaning against the wall, watching their flight with a cynical smile on his face.

At a glance, this youth seemed not unlike the others who lived in the corridors. The same red hair and clear translucent skin, the same rough tunic and enormous belt characterized this lad as it did all the others of Loor. But the discerning eye would have noticed in the immense brow, the narrow, hooked nose and the keen eyes, a promise of the greatness that was to some day be his.

The boy watched his fleeing friends for a moment and then gave a low bird-like whistle. Thupra stopped suddenly and turned around, and then, seeing the newcomer, called to Nikadur. The boy stopped his flight, too, and together they returned, rather shamefaced, to the end of the passage.

"You frightened us, Tumithak," said the girl, reproachfully. "What in the world were you doing in that room? Weren't

you afraid to go in there alone?"

"Nothing is in there to hurt me," answered Tumithak, loftily. "Often and often I have browsed around through these corridors and apartments and never yet have I seen any living thing, save the spiders and the bats. I was seeking for forgotten things," he went on, and his eyes grew suddenly brighter. "And look! I have found a book!" And, reaching into the bosom of his tunic, he drew forth his prize and exhibited it proudly to the others.

"This is an *old book*," he said. "See?"

It certainly was an old book. The cover was gone, more than half the leaves were missing, and the thin metal sheets of which the leaves were composed were even beginning to oxidize on the edges. Certainly, this book had been lying forgotten for centuries.

Nikadur and Thupra looked at it in awe, the awe that an illiterate person naturally holds for all the mysteries of the magic black marks that transmit thoughts. But Tumithak could read. He was the son of Tumlook, one of the food men, the men who held the secret of preparing the synthetic food that these people lived on, and these food men, as well as the doctors and the light and power men, retained many of the secrets of the wisdom of their ancestors. Foremost among these secrets was the very necessary art of reading; and as Tumithak was

intended to follow in his father's footsteps, Tumlook had early trained him in this wonderful art.

So, after the two had looked at the book and held it in their hands, and wondered, they beseeched Tumithak to read it to them. Often, they had listened in wide-eyed wonder as he read to them from some of the rare works the food men owned, and they never wasted a chance to watch the apparently mystifying process of changing the queer marks on the metal sheets into sounds and sentences.

Tumithak smiled at their importuning, and then, because secretly he was as anxious as they to know what the long-forgotten script contained, he motioned them to be seated on the floor beside him, and opening the book, began to read:

"The manuscript of Davon Starros; written at Pitmouth, Sol 22nd, in the year of the Invasion, 161, or in the old style—A.D. 3218."

Tumithak paused.

"That is an old book," whispered Nikadur in an awed voice, and Tumithak nodded.

"Nearly two thousand years!" he answered, "I wonder what the figures A.D. 3218 stand for?"

He puzzled over the book for a moment and then resumed his reading.

"I am an old man, in these latter days, and to one who can

remember the day when men still dared to fight, now and then, for liberty, it is indeed a bitter thing to see how the race has fallen.

"There is growing up among men in these days a hopeless superstition to the effect that man can never conquer, and must never attempt to even battle with the shelks, and it is to combat this superstition that the author here writes the story of the conquest of earth, in the hope that at some future time, a man will arise who will have the courage to face the conquerors of Man and again do battle. In the hope that this man will appear and that he may know the creatures against whom he fights, this story is written.

"The scientists who tell of the days before the Invasion, inform us that man was once little more than a beast. Through thousands of years he gradually worked his way upward to civilization, learning the arts of living, until he conquered all the world for his own.

"He learned the secret of producing food from the very elements themselves, he learned the secret of imitating the life-giving light of the sun, his great airships sped through the atmosphere as easily as his waterships sped through the seas. Wonderful, disintegrating rays dissolved the hills that stood in his way, and as a result, long canals brought water from the ocean to inacces-

sible deserts, making them blossom like earth's most fertile regions. From pole to pole, man's mighty cities grew, and from pole to pole man was supreme.

"For thousands of years, men quarreled among themselves, and great wars tore the earth, until at last their civilization reached a point where these wars ceased. A great era of peace settled down upon the earth, sea and land alike were conquered by man, and he began to look out to the other worlds that swung about the sun, wondering if these, too, might not be conquered.

"It was many centuries before they learned enough to attempt a journey into the depths of space. A way had to be found to avoid the countless meteors that filled the paths between the planets. A way had to be found to insulate against the deadly cosmic rays. It seemed that no sooner was one difficulty overcome than another arose to take its place. But one after another the difficulties in the way of interplanetary flight disappeared and at last the day came when a mighty vessel, hundreds of feet long, lay ready to leap into space to explore the other worlds."

Tumithak again paused in his reading.

"It must be a wonderful secret," he said. "I seem to be reading words, but I do not know what they mean. Some one is going somewhere, but that's

about all I can make of it. Shall I go on?"

"Yes! Yes!" they cried; so he continued:

"It was under the command of a man named Henric Sudiven; and, of all the great company that manned it, only he returned to the world of men to tell of the terrible adventures that they met with on the planet Venus, the world to which they traveled.

"The trip to Venus was a highly successful one, and quite uneventful. Week after week passed, while the evening star, as men called it, grew ever brighter and larger. The ship worked perfectly, and though the journey was a long one to those who were used to crossing an ocean in a single night, the time did not hang heavy on their hands. The day came when they sailed over the low rolling plains and broad valleys of Venus, under the thick mantle of clouds that forever hides the surface of that planet from the sun, and marveled at the great cities and works of civilization that were in evidence everywhere.

"After hovering over a great city for some time, they landed and were welcomed by the strange, intelligent creatures that ruled over Venus; the same creatures that we know today by the name of shelks. The shelks thought them demi-gods and would have worshipped them; but Sudiven and his companions,

true products of earth's noblest culture, scorned to dissemble; and when they had learned the language of the shelks, told them quite truthfully just who they were and from whence they came.

"The astonishment of the shelks knew no bounds. They were skilled far more than men in mechanical science; their knowledge of electricity and chemistry was quite as great; but astronomy and its kindred sciences were totally unknown to them. Imprisoned as they were under the eternal canopy of clouds that hides forever the sight of outer space, they had never dreamed of other worlds than he one they knew; and it was only with difficulty that they were at last persuaded that Sudiven's story was true.

"But, once convinced, the attitude of the shelks underwent a decided change. No longer were they deferential and friendly. They suspected that man had come only to conquer them and they determined to beat him at his own game. There was a certain lack of the more humane feelings in the make-up of the shelks, and they were quite unable to conceive of a friendly visit from strangers of another world.

"The Tellurians soon found themselves locked up in a great metal tower many miles from their space flier. In a moment of carelessness, one of Sudiven's

companions had let drop the remark that this flier was the only one yet built upon the earth, and the shelks decided to take advantage of this fact, to begin at once the conquest of earth.

"They took possession at once of the Tellurian's vessel, and with that unity of purpose that is so characteristic of the shelks and so lacking in man, began at once the construction of a vast number of similar machines. All over the planet, the great machine-shops hummed and clattered with the noise of the work; and while the earth awaited the triumphal return of her explorers, the day of her doom drew nearer and nearer.

"But Sudiven and the other Tellurians, locked up in their tower, had not given up to despair. Time after time, they attempted to escape, and there is no doubt but that the shelks would have slain them to a man, had they not hoped to extract further knowledge from them before they killed them. For once the shelks were in error; they should have slain the Tellurians, every one; for about a week before the date set for the departure of the shelks' great fleet of machines, Sudiven and about a dozen of his companions managed to escape.

"At terrific risk they made their way across the country to the place where their space car lay. An idea can be had of the dan-

gers of the journey when one realizes that on Venus, that is, on the inhabited side, it is always day. There was no concealing night to enable the Tellurians to travel without hope of discovery. But at last they came upon their car, guarded only by a few unarmed shelks. The battle that ensued is one that should go down in man's history, to inspire him in all the ages to come. When it was over the shelks were all dead and only seven men were left to man the space-flier on its journey back to earth.

"For weeks, the great bullet-shaped flier sped across the vast emptiness of space and at last landed upon the earth. Sudiven alone remained alive when it landed; the others had succumbed to some strange disease, a disease that had been given to them by the shelks.

"But Sudiven was alive and remained alive long enough to warn the world. Faced with this sudden terror, the world had little time for any but defensive measures. The construction of vast underground pits and caverns was begun at once, the intention being to construct great underground cities, in which man could hide himself and from which he could emerge to conquer his enemies at his leisure. But before they were well started, the shelks arrived and the war was on!

"Never, in the days when man warred with man, had anyone dreamed of a war like this. The shelks had arrived by the millions; it was estimated that fully two hundred thousand space cars took part in the invasion. For days man's defensive measures kept the shelks from gaining a landing space on the earth; they were forced to fly far above the surface, dropping their deadly gases and explosives where they could. From his subterranean halls, man sent up vast quantities of gases as deadly as those of the shelks, and their disintegrating rays sent hundreds of the space-cars into nothingness, killing off the shelks like flies. And from their fliers, the shelks dropped vast quantities of flaming chemicals into the pits that men had dug, chemicals that burned with terrific violence and exhausted the oxygen of the caverns, causing men to perish by the thousand.

"Ever, as men found themselves defeated by the shelks, they drove deeper and deeper into the earth, their wonderful disintegrations dissolving the rock almost as fast as a man could walk through the corridor it dug. Men were forced from the Surface at last, and a million intricate warrens of corridors and passages honeycombed the earth for miles beneath the surface. It was impossible for the shelks to ever thread the mazes of the innumerable labyrinths, and so man reached a

position of comparative safety.

"And thus came the deadlock.

"The Surface had become the property of the savage shelks, while far below them in the pits and corridors, man labored to hold on to the dregs of civilization that were left him. An unequal game it was, for man was sadly handicapped—the supplies of elements that produced the disintegrating rays gradually diminished, and there was no way of renewing them; they were unable to secure wood, or the thousand and one varieties of vegetation on which their industries were based; the men of one set of corridors had no way of communicating with the men of another, and always came hordes of shelks, down into the corridors, hunting men for sport!

The only thing that enabled them to live at all was the wonderful ability to create synthetic foods out of the very rock itself.

"So it was that man's civilization, fought for and won after centures of struggle, collapsed in a dozen years; and over it was imposed the Terror. Men, like rabbits, lived a life of fear and trembling in their underground holes, daring less each year, as time went by, and spending all their time and energy in devising means to sink their pits deeper and deeper into the ground. Today it seems that man's subjugation is complete. For over a hundred years, no man has dared to think

of revolt against the shelks, any more than a rat would think of revolt against man. Unable to form a unified government, unable even to communicate with his brethren in the neighboring corridors, man has come to accept far too willingly, his place as merely the highest of the lower animals. The spider-like Beasts of Venus are the supreme Masters of our planet, and—"

The manuscript had come to an end. Although the book had originally been much longer, although, indeed, what was left of it was probably little more than an introduction to some work on the life and customs of the shelks, the remainder was missing and the droning sing-song voice of Tumithak ceased as he read the concluding unfinished sentence. For several moments there was silence and then—

"How hard it was to understand," said Thupra. "I only know that men were fighting with shelks, just as though they were Yakrans."

"Who could have conceived such a story?" murmured Nikadur, "Men fighting with shelks: Of all the impossible tales!"

Tumithak did not answer. For quite a while he sat in silence and stared at the book as one who suddenly beheld some dazzling vision.

At last he spoke.

"Nikadur, that is history!" he exclaimed. "That is no strange

impossible tale of fancy. Something tells me that those men really lived; that that war was really fought: How else can we explain the life that we live. Have we not wondered often—have not our fathers wondered before us—how our wise ancestors ever gained the wisdom to build the great pits and corridors? We know that our ancestors had great knowledge; how did they come to lose it?

"Oh, I know that no legend of ours even suggests such a thing as men ruling this world," he went on, as he saw the incredulous look in the eyes of his companions. "But there is something—something in that book that tells me it is surely true. Just think, Nikadur! That book was written only a hundred and sixty years after the savage shelks invaded the earth! How much more that writer must have known than we who live two thousand years later. Nikadur, once men fought with shelks!" He arose, his eyes gleaming with the first glow of the fanatical light that, in after years, was to make him a man apart from his fellows, "*Once men fought with shelks:* and with the help of the High One, they shall do so again! Nikadur! Thupra! Some day *I* shall fight a shelk," he flung his arms wide, "some day *I* shall slay a shelk!"

"And to that I dedicate my life!"

He stood for a moment with his arms outstretched, and then, as if oblivious of their presence, he dashed down the hallway and in a moment was lost in the gloom. For a moment the two stared after him in amazement, and then, clasping hands, they walked slowly, soberly after him. They knew that something had suddenly inspired their friend, but whether it was genius or madness they could not tell. And they were not to know with certainty for many years.

Chapter II The Three Strange Gifts

Tumlook contemplated his son proudly. The years that had passed since he had discovered the strange manuscript and acquired his strange obsession may have ruined his mind, as some said, but they had certainly been kind to him, physically. Six feet tall, Tumithak stood (an exceptional height for these dwellers in the corridors), and every inch seemed to be of iron muscle. To-day, on his twentieth birthday, there was not a man that would not have hailed him as one of the leaders of the city, had it not been for his preposterous mania. For Tumithak was resolved to kill a shelk!

For years—in fact, since he had found the manuscript, at the age of fourteen—he had directed all his studies to this end. He had

poured over maps of the corridors ancient maps that had not been used for centuries—maps that showed the way to the Surface—and he was known to be an authority on all the secret passages in the pit. He had little idea of what the Surface was really like; there was little in the stories of his people to tell him of it. But of one thing he was certain, and that was, that on the Surface he would find the shelks.

He had studied the various weapons that man could still rely on—the sling, the sword, and the bow; and had made himself proficient in the use of all three. Indeed, in every way possible, he had prepared himself for the great work to which he had decided to devote his life. Of course, he had met with the opposition of his father, of the whole tribe, for that matter, but with the singleness of purpose that only a fanatic can attain, he persisted in his idea, resolved that when he was of age he would bid his people adieu, and set out for the Surface. He had given little thought to the details of what he would do when he arrived there. That would all depend on what he found. One thing he was sure of—that he would kill a shelk and bring its body back to show his people that men could still triumph over those who thought they were man's masters.

And today he became of age;

today he was twenty and Tumlook could not resist being secretly proud of this astounding son of his, even though he had done everything in his power to turn him from the impossible dream that he had conceived. Now that the day had come when Tumithak was to start on his absurd quest, Tumlook had to admit that in his heart, he had long been one with Tumithak, and that now he was eager to see the boy started on his way. He spoke:

"Tumithak," he said. "For years, I have sought to turn you from the impossible task that you have set yourself. For years, you have opposed me and persisted in believing in the actual possibility of achieving your dream. And now the day has come when you are to actually set out to achieve it. Do not think that it was anything other than a father's love that led me to oppose your ambition, and to try and keep you in Loor. But now that the day has come when you are free to do as you please, and as you are still determined to make your incredible attempt, you must at least allow your father to help you all he can."

He paused and lifted to the table a box about a foot square. He opened it and drew from it three strange-looking objects.

"Here," he said, impressively, "Are three of the most precious treasures of the food-men; implements devised by our wise an-

cestors of old. "This one," and he picked up a cylindrical tube about an inch in diameter and a foot long, "is a torch, a wonderful torch that will give you light in the dark corridors, by merely pressing this button. Take care not to waste its power, it is not made of the eternal light that our ancestors set in the ceilings. It is based on a different principle and after a certain time its power is exhausted."

Tumlook picked up the next object gingerly.

"This, too, is something that will surely help you, though it is neither so rare nor so wonderful as the other two. It is a charge of high explosive, such as we use occasionally for closing a corridor, or in mining the elements from which our food is made. There is no telling when it may come in handy, on your way to the Surface.

"And here," he picked up the last article, which looked like a small pipe with a handle set on one end, at right angles. "Here is the most wonderful article of all. It shoots a small pellet of lead, and it shoots it with such force that it will pierce even a sheet of metal! Each time this small trigger on the side is pressed, a pellet is ejected from the mouth of the pipe, with terrific force. It kills, Tumithak, kills even quicker than an arrow, and much surer. Use it carefully for there are but ten pellets, and

when they are gone, the instrument is useless."

He laid the three articles on the table before him, and pushed them across to Tumithak. The younger man took them and stowed them carefully in the pockets of his wide belt.

"Father," he said, slowly, "You know it is not anything in my heart that commands me to leave you and go on this quest. There is something, higher than either of you or I, that has spoken to me and that I must obey. Since mother's death, you have been both mother and father to me, and so I probably love you more than the average man loves his father. But I have had a Vision! I dream of a time when Man will once again rule on the Surface and not a shelk will exist to oppose him. But that time can never come as long as men believe the shelks to be invincible, and so I am going to prove that they can really be slain—and by men!"

He paused and before he could continue, the door opened and Nikadur and Thupra entered. The former was a man now, the responsibility of a householder having fallen upon him at his father's death, two years before. And the latter had grown into a beautiful woman, a woman that Nikadur was soon to marry. They both greeted Tumithak with deference and when Thupra spoke, it was in an awed voice, as one who addressed a demi-god; and Nikadur,

too, had obviously come to look upon Tumithak as something more than mortal. These two, with the possible exception of Tumlook, were the only ones who took Tumithak seriously, and so they were the only ones that he would call his friends.

"Do you leave us today, Tumithak?" asked Thupra.

Tumithak nodded. "Yes," he answered. "This very day. I start for the Surface. Before a month has gone by, I will lie dead in some distant corridor, or you shall look on the head of a shelk!"

Thupra shuddered. Either of these alternatives seemed terrible enough to her. But Nikadur was thinking of the more immediate dangers of the journey.

"You will have no trouble on the road to Nonone," he said, thoughtfully, "But mustn't you pass through the town of Yakra on the way to the Surface?"

"Yes," answered Tumithak. "There is no road to the Surface, except through Yakra. And beyond Yakra are the Dark Corridors, where men have not ventured for hundreds of years."

Nikadur considered. The city of Yakra had for over a century been the enemy of the people of Loor. Situated as it was, more than twenty miles nearer the Surface than Loor, it was inevitable that it should be much more conscious of the Terror. And it was just as inevitable that the people of Yakra should envy the Loor-

ians their comparative safety, and continually make attempts to seize the city for their own. The small town of Nonone, located between the two larger cities, found itself sometimes fighting with the Yakrans, sometimes against them, as suited the convenience of the chiefs of the more powerful cities. Just at present, and indeed for the past twenty years, it was allied to Loor, and so Tumithak expected no trouble on his journey until he attempted to pass through Yakra.

"And the Dark Corridors?" questioned Nikadur.

"Beyond Yakra, there are no lights," replied Tumithak. "Men have avoided these passages for centuries. They are entirely too near the Surface for safety. Yakrans have at times attempted to explore them, but the parties that went out never returned. At least, so the men of Nonone have told me."

Thupra was about to make some remark, but Tumithak turned and busied himself with the pack of foodstuff that he intended to take with him on his journey. He slung it over his back and turned toward the door.

"The time has come for me to begin my journey," he said impressively. "This is the moment that I have awaited for years. Farewell, father! Farewell, Thupra! Nikadur, take good care of my little friend, and—if I do not

return, name your first-born after me."

With a dramatic gesture that was characteristic of him, he thrust the door curtain aside and strode out into the corridor. The three followed him, calling and waving as he walked on up the hallway, but without so much as a backward glance, he strode along until he disappeared in the distant gloom.

They stood then, for a while, and then, with a dry sob, Tumlook turned and re-entered the apartment.

"He'll never return," he muttered to Nikadur. "He'll never return, of course."

Nikadur and Thupra answered nothing, only standing in uncomfortable silence. There was nothing consoling that they might say. Tumlook was right and it would have been foolish to attempt words of condolence that would have obviously been false.

The road that led from Loor to Nonone inclined very gradually upward. It was not an entirely strange road to Tumithak, for long ago he had been to that small town with his father; but the memory of the road was faint and now he found much to interest him as he left the lights of the populous portion of the town behind him. The entrances of other corridors continually appeared, corridors that were constructed to add to the labyrinthine maze, that made it impossible

for the creatures from the upper Surface to find their way into the great pits. The way did not lead along the broad main corridor for long. Often Tumithak would take his own way down what appeared to be quite an insignificant hallway, only to have it suddenly branch into another larger one, farther on.

It must not be supposed that Tumithak had so quickly forgotten his home in his anxiety to be on his quest. Often, as he passed some familiar sight, a lump would come into his throat and he would almost be tempted to give up his journey and return. Twice Tumithak passed food-rooms, rooms where the familiar mystic machines throbbed eternally, building up out of the very rocks their own fuel and the tasteless biscuits of food that these people lived on. It was then that his homesickness was the greatest, for many times he had watched his father operating such machines as these, and the memory made him realize poignantly all that he was leaving behind. But like all of the inspired geniuses of humanity, at times such as this, it almost seemed as if something outside of himself took charge of him and forced him on.

Tumithak turned from the last large corridor to a single winding hall not more than a half dozen feet in width. There were no doorways along this hall and it was much steeper than any he had

yet climbed. It ran on for several miles and then entered a larger passage through a door that was seemingly but one of a hundred similar ones that lined this new passage. These doors were apparently those of apartments, but the apartments seemed to be unused, for there were no signs of inhabitants in this district. Probably this corridor had been abandoned for some reason many years ago.

There was nothing strange in this to Tumithak, however. He knew quite well that these doorways were only to add extra confusion to the ones who sought to thread the maze of corridors, and he continued on his way, without paying the slightest attention to the many branching hallways, until he came to the room he sought.

It was an ordinary apartment, to all appearances, but when Tumithak found himself inside, he hastened to the rear and began to feel carefully over the walls. In a corner, he found what he was searching for—a ladder of metal bars, leading upwards. Confidently, he began the ascent, mounting steadily upward in the dark; and as minute followed minute, the faint glow of light that shone in from the corridor below grew smaller and smaller.

At last he reached the top of the ladder, and found himself standing at the mouth of the pit, in a room similar to the one he had left below. He strode out of the

room into another of the familiar door-lined corridors and turning in the direction that led upward, continued his journey. He was on the level of Nonone now, and if he hurried, he knew that he might reach that town before the time of sleep.

He hastened along, and presently he perceived a party of men in the distance, who gradually approached him. He drew into an apartment from which he peered out cautiously, until he assured himself that they were Nononese. The red color of their tunics, their narrow belts and the peculiar way they had of dressing their hair convinced him that these were friends and so Tumithak showed himself and waited for the party to approach him. When they saw him, the foremost man, who was evidently the leader, hailed him.

"Is not this Tumithak of Loor?" he asked, and as Tumithak replied in the affirmative, he continued, "I am Nennapuss, chief of the people of Nonone. Your father has acquainted us with the facts of your journey and asked us to be looking for you about this time. We trust that you will spend the next sleep with us; and if there is anything that we can do to add to your comfort or safety on your journey, you have but to command us."

Tumithak almost smiled at the rather pompous speech when the chief had evidently prepared be-

forehand, but he answered gravely that he would indeed be indebted if Nennapuss could provide him with sleeping quarters. The chief assured him that the best in the town would be provided, and, turning, led Tumithak off in the direction from which he and his party had come.

They traversed several miles of deserted passages before they finally came to the inhabited halls of Nonone, but once here, the hospitality of Nennapuss knew no bounds. The people of Nonone were assembled in the "Great Square," as the juncture of the two main corridors was called, and in a florid, flowing speech that was characteristic of him, Nennapuss told them of Tumithak and his quest; and presented him, as it were, with the keys of the city.

After an answering speech by Tumithak, in which the Loorian worked himself up into a fine fury of eloquence on his favorite subject—his journey—a banquet was prepared; and even though the food was only the tasteless biscuits that constituted the sole diet of these people, they gorged themselves to repletion. When Tumithak at last fell asleep, it was with the feeling that here, at least, a tentative slayer of shelks might find appreciation. Had not the proverb been buried in centuries of ignorance and forgetfulness, he might have mused that a pro-

phet is, verily, not without honor save in his own country.

Tumithak arose about ten hours later and prepared to bid good-by to the people of Nonone. Nennapuss insisted that the Loorian have breakfast with his family and Tumithak willingly complied. The sons of Nennapuss, two lads in their early teens, were enthusiastic during the meal, with the wonderful idea that Tumithak had conceived. Though the idea of any other man facing a shelk was incredible to them, they seemed to think that Tumithak was something more than the average mortal, and plied him with a hundred questions as to his plans. But, beyond having studied the long route to the Surface, Tumithak's plans were decidedly vague, and he was unable to tell them how he would slay his shelk.

After the meal, he again shoudered his pack and started up the corridor. The chief and his retinue followed him for several miles and as they went Tumithak questioned Nennapuss closely as to the condition of the passages to Yakra and beyond.

"The road on this level is quite safe," said Nennapuss, in answer to his questions. "It is patrolled by men of my city and no Yakran ever enters it without our being aware of it. But the pit that leads to the level of Yakra is always guarded at the top by the Yakrans, and I do not doubt but that you will have trouble when

you try to get out of that pit."

Tumithak promised to use an extra amount of caution when he reached this spot, and a short time later, Nennapuss and his companions said good-by to him and he trudged on alone.

He moved more warily, now, for though the Nononese patrolled these corridors, he knew quite well that it was possible for enemies to evade the guards and raid the corridors as had often been done in the past. He kept well in the middle of the corridor, away from the many doorways, any one of which may have concealed a secret road to Yakra, and he seldom passed one of the branching ways without peering carefully up and down it, before venturing to cross it.

But Thumithak was fortunate in meeting no one in the corridors, and after half a day he came at last to another apartment in which was located a shaft almost exactly similar to the one that had brought him to Nonone.

He mounted this ladder much more stealthily than he had the first one, for he was quite confident that a Yakran guard was at the top and he had no desire to be toppled backward into the pit when he reached there. As he drew near the end of the ladder, he drew his sword, but again luck favored him, for the guard had apparently left the room at the top of the well, and Tumithak drew himself up into the room

and prepared to enter the corridor.

But he had moved only a scant half dozen feet when his luck deserted him. He bumped violently into a table that he had failed to notice in the gloom, and the resulting noise brought a bull-like bellow from the corridor without. The next moment, sword in hand, a veritable giant of a man dashed through the door and made for Tumithak.

Chapter III The Passing of Yakra

That the man was a Yakran, Tumithak would have known, had he met him in the depths of Loor. Though the Loorian knew of the Yakrans only through the stories of the older men, who remembered the wars with that city, he saw at once that this was just the kind of barbarian that had figured in the stories. He was fully four inches taller than Tumithak, and far broader and heavier, and his chin was covered with a tremendous, bristly growth of beard—sufficient evidence that the owner was of Yakra. His tunic was covered with bits of bone and metal sewn into the cloth, the former stained in various colors and sewn in a crude pattern. Around his neck was a necklace made of dozens of finger-bones threaded on a thin strip of skin.

Tumithak saw in an instant that he would have little chance

with this huge Yakran if he were to stand fairly up to him, and so, even as he drew his sword and prepared to defend himself, he was casting about in his mind for some method to overcome him by strategy. The most probable plan, he decided at once, would be to drive him somehow into the pit; but to drive this colossus was almost as impossible as to defeat him by face to face fighting methods. And before Tumithak could devise any more subtle method of overcoming his adversary, he found his entire mind taken up with methods of defending himself.

The Yakran rushed at him, still shouting his rumbling war-cry, and it was but the merest lurch that enabled Tumithak to avoid the first terrific blow aimed at him. Tumithak dropped to one knee, but in a moment was up again and only just in time to avoid another sweep of that lightning sword. On his feet again, however, his defense was perfect, and the Yakran found it necessary to retire a step or two, in order to prepare another of his lunging rushes.

Again and again the Yakran rushed at Tumithak, and it was only the Loorian's uncanny skill at fencing, learned through many years in the hope of facing a shelk, that saved him. Around and around the table, now close to the pit and now farther away, they fought; until even Tumithak's

steel-like muscles began to tire. But as his body tired, his brain quickened, and at last a plan came to him to defeat the Yakran. He allowed himself to be gradually forced to the edge of the pit and then, as he parried a particularly powerful lunge, he suddenly threw one hand high in the air and screamed. The Yakran, believing that he had struck him, smiled a vicious smile and stepped back for a final rush. Sword pointing at Tumithak's breast, he dashed forward, and as he did so, Tumithak threw himself at his opponent's feet.

There was a wild howl from the giant as he stumbled over the recumbent form, but before he could recover himself, he dropped heavily at the very edge of the pit. Tumithak kicked wildly, and the great Yakran, grasping frantically at the air, dropped into the well! There was a hoarse cry from the darkness below, a heavy thud and then silence.

For several minutes, Tumithak lay panting at the edge of the pit. This was the first battle he had never had with a man, and though he was the victor, it was only by a miracle, it seemed, that he had not been defeated. What would the people of Loor and Nonone say, he wondered if they knew that their self-appointed slayer of shelks had been so nearly defeated by the first enemy that had attacked him—

and that enemy not a shelk, but a man, and a man of despised Yakra, at that? For several minutes, the Loorian lay, filled with self-reproach, and then, reflecting that if all his enemies were conquered with a margin even so small as this, his victory was certain, he arose, pulled himself together and left the room.

He was in Yakra now, and it was necessary for him to find some means of passing safely through the city in order to reach the dark corridors beyond. For only through these dark corridors might he win his way to the upper Surface. He continued cautiously on his way, turning over in his brain plan after plan that would enable him to deceive the Yakrans; but he was almost within sight of the inhabited walls of Yakra before he conceived an idea that seemed to him to be feasible. There was but one think that all men in these pits feared, with a fear that was quite unreasoning. And it was upon this unreasoning fear that Tumithak decided to play.

He began to run. He ran slowly at first, a mere trot, but as he drew nearer the corridors where men lived, he increased his pace, running faster and faster until he was fleeing along like one who had all the demons of hell at his back. Which was precisely the effect that he wished to produce.

In the distance he saw a group of Yakrans approaching. They beheld him at the same time that he spied them, and in a moment more were charging down on him; quite aware, as he knew, that he was not a Yakran. Instead of trying to avoid them, he charged straight into their midst, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Shelks!" he shouted, as though in the last stages of terror, "Shelks!"

The bellicose attitude of the men changed at once to one of extreme fright. Without a word to Tumithak or even so much as a backward glance, they turned, and as he dashed past them, they sped panic-stricken after him. Had they been men of Loor, they might have paused long enough to investigate, or at least, have held Tumithak and questioned him. But not these Yakrans. This town was many miles nearer the Surface than Loor, and many of the older men could still remember the last time that the shelks had raided these halls on one of their rare hunting expeditions, leaving a trail of death and destruction that would never be forgotten while those that witnessed it lived. So the terror was far more of a living thing to Yakra than it was to Loor, to whom it was little more than a terrible legend of the past.

And so, without a word of question, the Yakrans fled down the long corridor after Tumithak,

through branching hallways and through doorways that seemed mere entrances to apartments, but were actually roads to the main corridor. Several times they passed other men or groups of men, but at the fearful cry of "Shelks" these always dropped whatever they were doing and followed the frightened throng. A good many dashed down branching corridors, in which, they imagined, lay greater safety; but the majority continued on their way to the heart of the city, the direction in which Tumithak was going.

The Loorian was no longer in the lead now, several of the fleetier Yakrans had passed him, terror lending wings to their feet. And so the size of the mob grew, and was augmented by greater and greater numbers as they came closer to the town center; until at last the corridor was filled with a screaming, terrified multitude in which Tumithak was completely lost.

They neared the wide main corridor, and here they found a great mass of people that had surged in from every one of the branching corridors. How the news had traveled so quickly, Tumithak was unable to guess, but apparently the entire city was already aware of the supposed danger. And like sheep, or rather, like the humans they were, all had been seized with the same idea—the desire to reach the center of the city, where they sup-

posed, the greatest safety lay in the presence of the greatest numbers.

But now this frenzied confusion bade fair to defeat the plan that Tumithak had devised to cross the city safely under cover of the excitement he caused. To be sure, he had almost won to the center of the city without discovery, and the inhabitants were so wrought up that there would be little chance of anyone noticing that he was a stranger; but so thickly packed was the crowd that it became more and more certain that the Loorian was not going to be able to work his way through, in order to reach the corridors beyond. Yet in spite of the apparent hopelessness, Tumithak struggled along with the frantic mob, hoping against hope that he might gain a comparatively clear corridor beyond the city's center before the fright of the people died down to the point where they would begin the inevitable search for the one who had started the panic.

The crowd, its fright enhanced by that strange sense of telepathy that is evident in any large assembly of people, was becoming dangerous. Men were using their fists freely to better their way, they passed their weaker brothers, and here and there voices could be heard, high pitched with anger. Tumithak saw a man stumble and fall, and a moment later, heard a scream as the unfortunate

one was trampled on by the ones behind him. Hardly had the scream died away when there was another cry from the opposite side of the passage, where another man had fallen and found himself unable to regain his feet.

The Loorian seemed little more than a leaf borne along on the stream of shouting, gesticulating, Yakrans by the time he reached the center of the city. Time after time, he had almost been swept from his feet, only to regain his balance by what seemed a miracle. He had nearly gained the huge square that marked the crossing of the two main corridors when he stumbled over a fallen Yakran and almost went down. He attempted to pass on, and then stopped. The form beneath his feet was that of a woman with a baby in her arms!

Her face was tear-stained and bleeding, her clothes were torn in a dozen places, yet she was attempting bravely to prevent the injury of her child beneath the feet of the multitude. Tumithak instantly stooped over to raise her to her feet, but even before he could do so, the crowd had pushed him almost beyond the reach of her. Sudden anger swept over him, and plunging out wrathfully, he dealt blow after blow into the faces of the onrushing multitude of creatures, who would have crushed one of their own people in their anxiety for personal safety. The Yakrans

yielded before his blows, poured on either side of him for a moment, and in that moment, Tumithak stopped and raised the woman to her feet.

She was still conscious, as the wan smile that she bestowed upon him showed, and though he knew she was an enemy of his people, Tumithak felt a momentary pity that his ruse to frighten the Yakrans had been so successful. She was trying to tell him something, but so great were the confused shouts that it was impossible for him to understand her. He bent down his head to hers to hear what she had to say.

"The doorway across the hall," she screamed in his ear, "Try to get through the crowd to the third doorway across the hall! There is safety there!"

Tumithak placed her in front of him and drove savagely into the crowd, his fists flashing out around her and protecting her as they moved. It was hard to keep from being hustled, against his will, into the central square, but at last he gained the doorway and thrust the woman through it. He followed her inside, and gave a great gasp of relief as he found himself free from the struggles of the crowd. He stood for a moment in the doorway, to assure himself that nobody intended to follow them, and then turned back to the woman with the child.

She had torn a small piece of

cloth from the sleeve of her tattered garment and as he faced her, she paused from wiping the blood and tears from her face long enough to flash him a frightened, little smile. Tumithak could not but wonder at the apparent gentleness and refinement of this woman of savage Yakra. He had been taught to believe, since childhood, that the Yakrans were a strange race, not unlike our concept of goblins and witches, and yet, this woman might have been a daughter of one of the best families of Loor. Tumithak had to learn that in no matter what nation or age one finds oneself, he will find gentleness, if he looks, as well as savagery.

All this while the child, who had evidently been too frightened to cry, had been as silent as though dead, but now it set up a lusty screaming. The mother, after attempting for several moments to silence it with croonings and whispers, at last applied natures first silencer, and as the child quieted down and began nursing, she arose and motioning Tumithak to follow, led them way to the doorway across the room and entered the rear of the apartment. She was gone a moment, and then she called to the Loorian, and with a realization of what she meant dawning in his mind, he followed her. In the next room, sure enough, the woman pointed to the ceiling and showed him the circular hole of

a shaft leading straight upward. "Here is the entrance to an old corridor that is not known to more than twenty people in all Yakra," she said, "It leads across the square to the upper end of the city. We can hide up there for days and the shelks will probably never know that we exist. Here is safety."

Tumithak nodded and began the ascent of the ladder, pausing only long enough to assure himself that the woman was following him. The ladder extended not more than thirty feet upward and then they found themselves in the dark in a corridor that must have been unused for many centuries. So dark was it that as soon as they moved away from the pit shaft, it was impossible to distinguish the faintest glow of light. Certainly the woman was right in calling this an unknown corridor. Even Tumithak's maps had never told him of this passage.

The woman seemed to be quite at home in the passage, however, for with a whispered word to Tumithak, she began to feel her way along the wall, only stopping now and then to whisper softly to her baby. Tumithak followed her, keeping one hand on her shoulder and so they felt their way along until they came at last to a spot where a single light glowed dimly, and here the woman sat down to rest. Tumithak did likewise, and the woman, reaching into her pocket, drew

out a crude needle and thread and began to stitch the tears in her garment. Presently she spoke.

"Isn't it terrible," she whispered, her voice hushed as though she feared that even here the shelks might be listening. "What has started them to hunting again, I wonder?"

Tumithak made no reply and in a moment, she continued:

"My grandfather was killed in a shelk raid. That must have been nearly forty years ago. And now they have come upon us again! My poor husband! I separated from him almost as soon as we left our apartment. Oh! I do hope he reaches safety. He doesn't know about this corridor." She looked to him for comfort. "Do you think he will be safe?"

Tumithak smiled.

"Will you believe me if I tell you that he is surely safe from the shelks?" he asked. "Truly I can assure you that he will not be slain by the shelks in this raid."

"I only hope you are right," the woman began, and then, as if she had noticed him for the first time, she continued, suddenly. "You are not of Yakra!"

And then quite positively and harshly, "You are a man of Loor!"

Tumithak realized that the woman had at last noticed the Loorian clothes that he wore, and so made no attempt to lie.

"Yes," he answered, "I am of Loor."

The woman arose in consternation, clasping her baby tighter to her breast, as though to protect it from this ogre from the lower corridors.

"What are you doing in these halls?" she asked, fearfully, "Is it you that have brought this raid down upon us? I could well believe that the men of Loor would ally themselves with the shelks, if such a thing were possible. And surely, this is the first time in history that the shelks ever came upon us from the lower end of the city."

Tumithak considered for a moment. He saw no reason why he should not tell this woman the truth. It could do her no harm, and might at least put her mind at rest, regarding the safety of her husband.

"It will probably be the last time that the shelks ever come upon you from the lower end of the city, too," he said, and in a few brief words, he explained to her his ruse and its rather appalling success.

"But why should you desire to pass through Yakra?" she asked, incredulously. "Are you going into the dark corridors? What man in his senses would desire to explore them?"

"I am not seeking to explore the dark corridors," the Loorian answered, "My goal lies even beyond them!"

"Beyond the dark corridors?"

"Yes," said Tumithak, and rose to his feet. As always when he spoke of his "mission," he was, for the moment a dreamer, a fanatic.

"I am Tumithak," he said. "I am the slayer of the shelk. You wish to know why I seek to go beyond the dark corridors? It is because I am on my way to the Surface. For on the Surface is a shelk that, all unknowing, awaits his doom! I am going to slay a shelk!"

The woman gazed at him in consternation. She was quite certain, now, that she was alone with a madman. No other could even conceive such an incredible thought. She clasped her child tighter to her and drew away from him.

Tumithak was quick to notice her attitude. He had, many times before, seen people draw away from him in just the same manner, when he spoke of his mission. And so, quite unoffended by her unflattering opinion of him, he began to explain to her why he believed it possible for men to once more engage in battle with the masters of the Surface.

The woman listened for a while, and as he waxed more and more eloquent on his subject, Tumithak saw that she was beginning to believe. He told her of the book he had found, and how it had

decided for him what his mission in life should be. He told her of the three strange gifts of his father, and how he hoped they would help him to be successful in his quest. And at last, he saw the look come into her eyes that he had often seen in Thupra's and knew that she believed.

The woman's thoughts, however, had been quite different from what Tumithak believed. She had listened, to be sure, but as she listened, she was thinking of the fury with which Tumithak had attacked the terror stricken mob that had nearly crushed her. She was studying the erect, handsome form of him, the smooth-shaven face and keen eyes; and comparing him with the men of Yakra. And at last she believed, not because of Tumithak's eloquence, but because of the age-old appeal of sex.

"It is well that you saved me," she said at last, when the Loorian paused in his story. "It would have hardly been possible for you to force your way through the lower corridors. Up here, you may cross Yakra at your leisure, and leave it whenever you will. I will show you the way to the upper end of the city, now, if you wish."

She arose.

"Come, I will guide you. You are a Loorian and an enemy, but you saved my life, and one who would slay a shelk is surely the

true friend of all mankind."

She took him by the hand (though that was hardly necessary), and led him on into the darkness. Minute after minute passed in silence and then, at last, she paused and whispered, "The corridor ends here."

She stepped into the doorway, and following her, Tumithak discerned a faint light coming up through a shaft from the corridor below.

He dropped down the ladder that he could see dimly in the gloom, and in a moment was in the lower corridor. The woman followed him, and when she reached the ground she pointed up the corridor.

"If you are really going to the Surface, your road lies that way," she said, "and we must part here. My road lies back into the town. I wish I might know you better, O Loorian," she paused and then, as she strode off, she turned to exclaim, "Go on to the Surface, strange one, and if you succeed in your quest, do not fear to pass through Yakra on your return. All the city would worship you then, and do you reverence."

As if afraid to say more, she hurried down the passage. Tumithak watched her for a moment and then, with a shrug, turned and walked away in the opposite direction.

He had expected to reach the dark corridors soon after leaving Yakra; but although his maps

told him much concerning the route he must take, they were silent concerning the conditions of the various corridors; and it soon became evident to Tumithak that he was not to reach the dark corridors that day. Fatigue overcame him at last, and entering one of the many deserted apartments that lined the passage, he threw himself upon the floor and in a moment was sound asleep.

Chapter IV The Dark Corridors

Hours after, the Loorian awakened with a start. He looked about him vaguely for a moment, and then started into full wakefulness. In the corridor without he had heard a soft rustling. Scarcely breathing, he arose and, tiptoeing to the doorway, peered cautiously out. The corridor was empty, yet Tumithak was certain that he had heard soft footsteps.

He stepped back into the room, picked up his pack, which he had removed before falling asleep, and adjusted it on his back. Then, once more carefully scanning the empty corridor, he stepped out and prepared to resume his journey.

Before going on, though, he drew his sword and looked thoroughly through all the neighboring apartments. It puzzled him to find them all deserted. He was quite sure that he had heard

a noise, was quite sure, he felt, that someone, from somewhere, was watching him. But at last, he was forced to admit that unless he was mistaken in their existence, the watchers were more clever than he; and so, keeping well to the center of the corridor, he took up his journey again.

For hours, he kept up a continuous, monotonous pace. The route was steadily upward, the corridor was broad, and to Tumithak's surprise the lights continued undimmed. He had almost forgotten the cause of his sudden awakening, when, after traveling some eight or nine miles, he was suddenly aware of another soft, rustling sound, quite similar to the former one. It came from one of the apartments on his left, and he had scarcely heard it, when he sprang like lightning to the door from which it came, his sword flashing from its sheath. He dashed into the apartment, through the front room and into the rear one, and then stood foolishly, looking around him at the bare brown walls. Like the apartment which he had examined in the morning, this one was quite empty. There were no ladders up which the mysterious one might have escaped, indeed, there seemed to be no way in which anyone might have escaped discovery and, at last, Tumithak was forced to continue on his way.

But he moved more warily,

now. He was as cautious as he had been before entering Yakra; in fact, even more so, for then he had known what to expect, and was facing the unknown.

As the hours passed, Tumithak becoming increasingly certain of the fact that he was being followed—was being watched. Time after time, he would hear the slight rustling noise, sometimes from the dark recesses of an apartment, sometimes from down the path of some dimly lighted branching corridor. Once he was certain that he heard the sound far ahead of him, in the hall that he was traversing. But never was he able to catch so much as a glimpse of the beings that caused the sound.

At last he came to a section of the corridors where the lights began to dim. At first only a few were affected, their light coming from the plates with a peculiar bluish glow, but before long the bluish tint was the rule rather than the exception, and many of the lights were out entirely. Tumithak traveled on in an increasing gloom, and realized that he was, at last, really approaching the legendary dark corridors.

Now, Tumithak was the product of a hundred generations of men who had fled from the slightest suspicious sound. For hundreds of years after the Invasion, an unusual sound had meant a man-hunting shelk, and a shelk had meant death, sudden, sure and unmistakable. So man

had become a skulking, fleeing race of creatures that fled panic-stricken from the least suspicion of danger.

In deep-cut Loor, however, men had made a warren so intricate and lengthy that years had passed since a shelk had been seen. And so it came about that the men grew more courageous in Loor, until there arose, at last, a visionary who dared to dream of slaying a shelk.

But although Tumithak was bolder by far than any other man of his generation, it must not be supposed that he had overcome, entirely, the heritage that was man's. Even now as he trudged so firmly up the apparently endless hallway, his heart was beating wildly, and it would have taken little to send him back on the way he had come, his heart almost smothering him in his fright.

But apparently those who followed him knew well not to agitate his fears too greatly. As the corridors grew darker, the noises lessened, and at last, Tumithak decided that he was quite alone. Whatever had been following him, he felt, had turned back or continued down one of the branching halls. For over an hour, he strained his ears in an attempt to hear again the soft noises, but only silence was his reward; so his vigilance gradually lessened and he trod more and more carelessly up the hall.

He passed from a corridor of eternal gloom to one of eternal darkness. Here the lights, if there had ever been any, had long since ceased to glow, and for some time Tumithak felt his way along the passage, depending only on his sense of touch.

And in the corridor below, a number of dark, gaunt figures moved from the gloom to the darkness and hurried silently toward him.

As they went, they would have presented a strange appearance, could anyone have seen them. Gaunt almost to the point of emaciation, with strange, slate-colored skins, perhaps the most surprising thing about their appearance was their heads, which were wrapped with layer after layer of strips of cloth which completely covered their eyes, making it impossible for the slightest ray of light to reach them.

For these were the savages of the dark corridors—men born and raised in the halls of eternal night — and so sensitive were their eyes that the least light was an intolerable pain. All day long they had been shadowing Tumithak, and all day long their eyes had been veiled with the bandages, leaving the savages to move by their astounding senses of hearing and feeling alone. But now that they were again in the halls that were their home, they hastened to remove the cumbersome cloths. And when this was ac-

complished they gradually closed in upon their intended victim.

The first intimation of their presence that Tumithak had after entering the darkness was when he heard a sudden rush behind him. He turned quickly, drew his sword and lashed out savagely. His sword cut through the air, he heard a sardonic laugh and then silence. Furiously he lunged again, and again his sword met only empty air, and then he heard new rustling in the hall behind him.

He turned, realizing that they had surrounded him. Sword flashing furiously, he backed to the wall prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible. He felt his blade strike something that yielded, heard a cry of pain and then suddenly quiet descended on the corridor. The Loorian was not to be deceived, however, he kept up the vicious beating about him with his sword, and presently had the satisfaction of hearing another groan of pain as he struck one of the savages who had attempted to creep under his guard.

But, though Tumithak continued to defend himself to the best of his ability, and lashed about with the courage born of desperation, he had little doubt as to the outcome of the struggle. He was alone, with his back to the wall; while his enemies, already numbering he knew not how many, were constantly having

their numbers added to, by the arrival of others. Tumithak prepared to die fighting, his only regret was that he must die in this stygian darkness, unable even to see the opponents who conquered him—and then suddenly he remembered the torch, the first of his father's strange gifts.

With his left hand, he fumbled in his belt and drew out the cylinder. At least he would have the satisfaction of knowing what sort of creatures these were that had attacked him. In a moment he had found the switch and filled the hall with light.

He was totally unprepared for the effect that the brilliant beam of light had upon his enemies. Cries of pain and dismay burst from them, and Tumithak's first sight of the savages was that of a dozen or more scrawny, dark-colored figures that buried their heads in their arms and turned to flee in terror down the passage. Panic-stricken, bawling strange, harsh words to their companions, they fled from the light, as if Tumithak had suddenly been reinforced by all the men of Loor.

For a moment Tumithak stood dazed. He was, of course, unable to account for the sudden flight of his attackers. The idea occurred to him that they fled from some danger that he was unable to see and he flashed his light about the corridor fearfully, but

at last, as their cries diminished in the distance, the truth gradually dawned on him. These creatures were so much at home in the dark that it must really be, thought Tumithak, that they feared the light; and though he could not understand why this should be, he determined to keep the torch burning as long as his route remained in the dark.

So flashing its rays this way and that, up branching corridors and into open doorways, the Loorian continued on his way. He knew that any thought of sleeping in these dark halls was out of the question, but this bothered him little. Shut up in the pits and corridors for centuries, man had forgotten the regular hours that he had once kept, and although he usually slept eight or ten hours out of thirty, it was entirely possible for a man to go forty or fifty hours before he felt the necessity of sleep. Tumithak had often worked steadily, under his father, for as many hours as this, and so now he felt confident that he would be out of the dark corridors long before he gave way to fatigue.

He munched, now and then, on the biscuits of synthetic food that he had brought with him; but for the most part, his entire time was spent in carefully scanning the corridors before and behind him. And so the hours passed. He had almost reached the point where his fears were allayed sufficiently

to allow him to enter one of the apartments and seek slumber, when he heard, far behind him in the corridor, a strange inhuman snarl. Fear seized him instantly. He felt a sudden crawling sensation at the back of his neck, and, darting instantly into the nearest doorway, he extinguished his torch and lay trembling in an excess of fear.

It must not be supposed that Tumithak had suddenly become a coward. Remember the courage with which he had faced the Yakran and the dark savages. But it was the inhumanity of the sound that terrified him. In the lower passages, with the exception of rats, bats and a few other small creatures, no animals had ever been known. Except the shelks. They alone had followed man into his pits, and so it was natural that to them alone could Tumithak attribute the sound that had certainly come from some large creature other than man. He was yet to learn that there were other animals from the Surface that had been driven into these upper corridors.

So now he cowered in the apartment, vainly attempting to lash his courage to the point where he could go out and face his enemy. Suppose it were a shelk, he argued. Had he not come all these dangerous miles for the sole purpose of facing a shelk? Was he not Tumithak, the hero whom the high one had called to deliver

Man from the heritage of fear that was his? And so, with arguments such as this, his indomitable spirit lashed his body into a semblance of courage, until at last he arose and again entered the corridor.

As he might have known, it appeared empty. His flashlight lit up the passage fully five hundred feet away, but the corridor was apparently quite deserted. He continued on his way; but as he went, he now paid more attention to the lower corridor than he did to the corridor above. And so, presently, he noticed, at the very limit of the light, a number of strange, slinking figures that followed him at a safe distance. His sharp eyes told him that these creatures were neither shelks nor men; but what they were, he was at a loss to guess. It was many generations since the men of the lower corridors had even heard of man's one-time friend the dog.

He paused uncertainly and watched these strange creatures. They slunk out of reach of the torch's rays at once, and after a moment Tumithak turned and continued his journey, half convinced that, in spite of their size, they were merely some large species of rat, as cowardly as their smaller brethren.

In this he was soon to find himself mistaken. He had continued for but a short distance, when he heard a snarl in the corridor

ahead of him; and as though this were a signal, the beasts behind him began to draw steadily closer. Tumithak increased his pace, broke into a trot, and finally into a run; but fast as he went, the beasts behind him were faster, and gradually closed in on him.

It was when they were but a little less than a hundred feet behind him that he noticed their masters. The savages that he had vanquished a few hours before had returned, their faces buried in the swathings that they had worn when the stalked him in the corridors beyond Yakra. And with whispered urgings, they drove the dogs on until Tumithak again found it necessary to draw forth his sword and prepare to defend himself.

The beasts from the upper end of the corridor had appeared by this time and the Loorian soon found himself surrounded by a snarling, snapping pack of creatures against whose numbers it was utterly useless to attempt to defend himself. He slew one, another fell snapping at a great gash across its mangy back; but before he could do more, his light was knocked out of his hand and he felt a half dozen hairy forms leap upon him. He fell heavily to the ground with the dogs on top of him, his sword flying from his hand and disappearing in the darkness.

Tumithak expected to die then

and there. He felt the hot breath of the monsters on various parts of his body, and that strange feeling of resignation came over him that almost every one feels in the presence of almost certain death, and then—the dogs were pulled away, and he felt hands on him and heard soft, muttering words as the savages felt over his body. He was pinnioned to the ground by a half dozen wiry hands, and a moment later a band was tightened around him, fastening his arms firmly to his sides. He was picked up and carried away.

They carried him on up the corridor for some distance, turned after a while into one of the branching halls and continued for a long time before they at last halted and threw him upon the ground. Around him he heard many soft sounds, whispered conversation and the rustling of moving bodies, and he decided that he had been taken to the central halls of these creatures. After lying for some time, he was rolled over and a pair of thin hands felt him all over, and then a voice spoke firmly and with authority. Again he was picked up, and carried for a short distance and then he was unceremoniously dumped down upon the floor of what he suspected was the floor of an apartment. Something metallic clanged on the floor beside him and he heard the departing footsteps of his captors

in the corridor beyond the door.

For a while Tumithak lay still, gathering his thoughts. He wondered vaguely why he had not been killed, little dreaming that the savages knew well enough not to kill their meat until they were ready for the feast. For these savages had no knowledge of the preparation of the machine-made food, and lived by preying on Yakra and other smaller towns that existed far down the branching corridors. Reduced to such desperate straits, anything that would provide sustenance became their food and for many generations they had been cannibals.

After a while, Tumithak arose. He had little trouble in working loose the bonds of cloth that he was tied with; the knowledge of knots that the savages possessed was elementary, and so it took less than an hour for the Loorian to free himself. He began feeling carefully over the walls of the apartment, in an attempt to acquaint himself with the features of his prison. The room was little more than ten feet square, and the walls were broken by but a single door, the entrance. Thumithak attempted to pass through this door, but was halted immediately by a growl and a snarl, and a rough hairy body pushed against his legs, driving him back into the apartment. The savages had left the dogs to guard the entrance to his prison.

Tumithak stepped back into the room and as he did so, his foot struck an object that rolled across the floor. He remembered the metallic object that had been thrown into the apartment with him and wondered curiously what it was. Groping around, he finally located it, and to his joy realized that it was his flashlight. He was quite unable to understand why the savages had brought it here, but he decided that to their superstitious minds, it was something to fear, and that they thought it best to keep these two dangerous enemies imprisoned together. At any rate, here it was, and for that Tumithak was grateful.

He turned it on and looked around as its rays filled the apartment with light. Yes, he had been right about its size and simplicity. There was little chance, none at all, in fact, of his escaping unless he passed through the beast-guarded doorway. And in the light, Tumithak saw that the savages had left him but little chance to escape that way. The entire pack of over twenty stood just without the doorway, their eyes dazzled and blinking in the sudden light.

From within the doorway, Tumithak could look far up the corridor, and he could see no one at all in all that stretch of hallway, as far as his light reached. He flashed it down the hallway; it, too, was empty. He decided

that it was probably the time of sleep for these savages, and realized that if he was to escape, no better time would offer itself than the present. He sat down on the floor of the apartment and gave himself up to thought. Somewhere in the back of his mind an idea was glimmering, a faint conviction that he possessed the means to escape those animals. He arose and looked at the pack, huddled together in the corridor as if to protect themselves from the unwelcome rays of the torch. He turned to study the room, but apparently found little there to favor his half-formed plan. Suddenly, though, he reached a decision, and feeling in the pocket of his belt, he removed a round, pointed object, and pulling a pin from it, hurled it out among the pack and threw himself flat on his face!

It was the bomb, the second of his father's strange gifts. It struck the floor of the corridor without, and burst with a roar that was nothing short of deafening. In the confined space of the passage, the expanding gases acted with terrific force. Flat on the floor though he was, Tumithak was lifted and hurled violently against the opposite wall of the apartment. As for the beasts in the corridor without, they were practically annihilated. Torn bodies were flung in every direction, and when Tumithak, bruised and shaken, entered the

corridor a few minutes later, he found it deserted of every living thing. But the scene resembled a shambles, with blood and torn bodies strewn all over the corridor.

Sick with the unaccustomed sight of blood and death, Tumithak hastened to put as much distance as possible between himself and the gruesome scene. He hurried on up the corridor, through the still smoke-laden air, until at last the air cleared and the horrors of the scene could be forgotten. He saw no signs of the savages, although twice he heard a whimpering from the doorway of some apartment and knew that a dark form probably cowered, terror-stricken, in the darkness. It would be many, many sleeps before the savages of the dark corridors forgot the enemy who had caused such destruction among them.

Thumithak emerged again into the corridor that led to the Surface. For the first time since he set out on that route, he retraced his steps, but it was with a definite object in view. He arrived at the place where he had battled with the dogs, and retrieved his sword, finding it without difficulty and noting with satisfaction that it was entirely unharmed. Then he once again took up his journey to the Surface, continuing for long without meeting with anything that could give him cause for alarm. At last he

decided that he was past the dangerous parts of these halls, and entering one of the apartments he prepared himself for a long-needed rest . . .

He slept long and dreamlessly, awaking at last after more than fourteen hours of sleep. He immediately took up his journey again, partaking of his food as he went and wondering what this new march would mean for him.

But he was not to wonder for long. He was quite aware, from his maps, that he was now more than half through with his journey, and so he was not surprised when the walls of the corridors, which, ever since leaving Loor had continued as smooth and glossy as those of his own home, now began to assume a rough, irregular appearance, almost like that of a natural cavern. He was, he knew, approaching that section of the corridors which man had carved out in the days of his first panic-stricken flight into the earth. There had been little time, in those first days, to smooth down the walls of the corridors or to give them the regular rectangular appearance that they were to have in the lower corridors.

But though he was not surprised at this appearance of the passages, he was totally unprepared for their next change. He had travelled perhaps three or four miles through the winding, narrow caverns, when he came

upon a well-concealed pit-mouth that led far up into the darkness. He could see that there was a light at the top and gave a sigh of gratitude, for his light had begun to show the first signs of failing. He climbed the ladder slowly, with his usual caution, and at last, emerging warily from the mouth of the shaft, he stepped into the strangest corridor he had ever beheld.

Chapter IV The Hall of the Esthetts

The hall in which Tumithak found himself was more brilliantly lighted than any he had ever seen. The lights were not all of the usual clear white, here and there blues and greens vied with reds and golden yellows to add beauty to a scene that was already beautiful beyond anything that Tumithak had ever imagined. For a moment, he was at a loss to understand just where the luminescence was coming from, for there were no shining plates in the center of the ceiling, such as he had always been familiar with. But after a while, an explanation of the system of lighting dawned on him, and he saw that all the plates were cleverly concealed in the walls, so that the light reflected from them produced an effect of soft, creamy mellowness.

And the walls—the walls were no longer of the familiar glossy brown stone; they were of stone

of the purest milky white! And though this in itself was a wonder that must have excited the Loorian's astonishment, it was not the color of the walls that held his attention riveted to them. It was the fact that the walls were covered with designs and pictures, intaglios and bas-reliefs, to such an extent that not a clear space was visible on walls or ceiling, at any place along the corridor. And even the floor bore an intricate design of varicolored inlaid stone.

Now, Tumithak had never dreamed of the possibility of such a thing as this. There was no art in the lower corridors, there never had been. That had been lost to man long before the first passage had been blasted down to Loor. And so Tumithak stood lost in wonder at the marvel that confronted him.

Although most of the wall was covered with design, there were many pictures, too. They showed in detail many wonderful things, things that Tumithak could scarcely believe existed. Yet here they were before him, and to his simple mind the fact that they were here in pictures were proof that somewhere they existed in reality.

Here, for instance, was a group of men and women dancing. They were in a circle and they danced around something in the center; something that could only partly be seen. But as he looked at

it, Tumithak again felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to rise—the creature had long and spidery legs, and from somewhere in his subconscious mind a voice whispered, "Shelk."

Turning with a puzzled feeling of disgust from that picture, he came upon another one—it depicted a long corridor, and in it a cylindrical object that must have been eighteen or twenty feet long. It was mounted on wheels and around it were gathered a group of eager, waiting humans, with happy, excited looks on their faces. Tumithak puzzled over the pictures for many moments, unable to understand them. They didn't make sense. These people did not seem to fear the shelks! He came upon a picture that proved it. It showed again the long cylindrical object, and at its side were three beings that could be nothing but sheiks. And grouped around them, talking and gesticulating, were another group of humans.

There was one thing that particularly impressed Tumithak in these pictures. The people were all fat. Not a one of them but was florid and grossly overweight. But it was probably natural, thought the Loorian, of people who lived near the Surface and were apparently without any fear of the terrible shelk. Such a people would naturally have little to do but live and grow fat.

And so, musing and looking

at the pictures, he continued along his way, until he saw in the distance, up the corridor a ponderous human form and realized that he was reaching the inhabited part of these corridors. The form disappeared down a branching corridor, almost as soon as he glimpsed it, but it was enough to make Tumithak realize that he must go much more carefully. So, for a long while, he slipped cautiously along the side of the passage, using every opportunity that was offered for concealment. He found a thousand things to excite his wonder; indeed, ere long he found himself in a constant state of astonishment. Great tapestries were hung along the wall at one spot, at another, his heart leapt into his mouth as he came suddenly upon a group of statues. It was hard for him to realize that these carven stones were not really men.

There had been no doorways on the sides of the corridors at first; but now the corridor widened until it must have been full forty feet broad, and apartment entrances began to appear. High and wide, these doorways were, and the "curtains" that covered them were of metal! It was Tumithak's first contact with true doors, for in Loor the cloth curtains were all that ever separated apartments from the corridor without.

Minute after minute passed, as Tumithak continued on his way.

The pictures on the walls grew more elaborate, the corridor grew higher and even wider; and then, in the distance, Tumithak saw a number of human forms approaching him. He knew that he must not be seen, debated for a moment the advisability of turning about and retreating, and then he noticed an open door close to him. Before him was discovery and danger, behind him lay an unthinkable retreat. Tumithak had little choice in the matter; in a moment he had made his decision, had pushed the door wide open and stepped inside.

For a moment he stood, his eyes, used to the brilliant light without, failing him in the gloom of the apartment. Then he realized that he was not alone, for the room was occupied by a man who, to all appearances, was so frightened at Tumithak's sudden appearance as to be quite speechless. Tumithak took advantage of the other's evident fright to observe him carefully and to look about the room for some means of escape or concealment.

The room was lighted much more dimly than the hall, the light coming from two plates concealed in the wall near the ceiling. The walls were of a uniform dull blue and in the rear a tapestry door led to the back room. A table, a huge, padded chair, a bed, and a shelf that was filled with books, made up the furni-

ture of the room. And in the midst of the bed lay this huge man.

The man was a veritable mountain of flesh. Tumithak estimated that he certainly must have weighed four hundred pounds. He was well over six feet tall, and the bed on which he lay, and which would easily have held three of Tumithak's fellow citizens, was completely filled with his bulk. He was a florid, full-blooded type of man; and his pale blond hair and beard only served to accentuate the redness of his face and neck.

But the coarseness of the man's features was offset by the refinement of his surroundings. Never had such luxuries been dreamed of by the man of Loor. The clothes that the man wore were of the finest texture imaginable, sheer gauzes that were dyed in the most delicate shades of nacreous pinks, and greens, and blues. They flowed down over his form, softening and dignifying the immense obesity of him. The bed-clothes were as fine and sheer as the man's garments, but of a deep shade of green and brown. The bed itself was a revelation, a glorious triumph in inlaid metals that might have been wrought by some wonderful artisan of the Golden Age. And flung across the floor was a rug—And the pictures on the wall!—

The man suddenly regained

control of himself. He set up a scream, a high-pitched womanly scream that seemed strangely absurd coming from one of his bulk. Tumithak was at his side in an instant, with his sword at the fat one's throat.

"Stop that!" he ordered peremptorily. "Stop it at once, or I'll kill you!"

The other subsided, his screams at once becoming a series of involuntary agonized groans. Tumithak stood listening, fearful that the first scream might have been effective, but the silence from without was unbroken. After fully a minute, the man spoke.

"You are a wild man," he said, and his voice was full of terror. "You are a wild man of the lower corridors! What are you doing here among the Chosen Ones?"

Tumithak ignored the question.

"Make another sound, fat one," he whispered, fiercely, "and there will be one less mouth to feed in these halls." He looked toward the door anxiously. "Is any one likely to enter here?" he asked.

The other attempted to answer, but apparently his fear had by now rendered him speechless. Tumithak laughed scornfully, a strange elation possessing him. It was indeed pleasant to the Loorian to find some one that feared him so terribly. Man had not felt this strange sense of power often in the preceding cen-

turies and Tumithak was half tempted to increase the other's fears, but in the end this emotion was overcome by his curiosity. Seeing that the fat man's terror of the sword was a very real one, he lowered it and returned it to its sheath.

The fat man breathed easier then, but it was some moments before speech returned. Then when he did speak, it was only to repeat the question he had asked before.

"What are you doing here in the halls of the Esthetts?" he gulped fearfully.

Tumithak considered his answer carefully. These people, he knew, did not fear the shelk; clearly, then, they were friendly with them. The Loorian doubted the advisability of confiding in the obese craven, but at the same time it seemed absurd to fear him or any others like him. And the natural conceit that is a part of every great genius made Tumithak long to boast of his mission so that at last he decided to answer the question.

"I am on my way to the Surface," he said. "I come from the lowest pit of all, so far down that we have never even heard of the halls of the Esthetts, as you call them. Are you one of the Esthetts?"

"On your way to the Surface," said the other, who was now fast losing his fear. "But you have not been called! You will be killed

at once. Think you that the Holy Shelks will permit any one to attain the Surface uncalled for?" His nose twitched scornfully. "And a wild man of the lower corridors at that!"

Tumithak was stung by the scorn in the other's voice.

"Listen, fat one," he said, "I do not ask the permission of any one to visit the Surface. As for the shelks, my whole object in reaching the Surface is that I might kill one of them."

The other looked at him with a look that Tumithak was at a loss to interpret.

"You will soon die," said the Esthett, calmly. "There is no need of my fearing you any longer. Surely any one who speaks such unthinkable blasphemy is doomed even as he says it." He settled himself more comfortably in his bed as he spoke, and looked at Tumithak curiously.

"From where, oh, Wild One, did such an impossible idea come to you?" he asked.

The Loorian might have had a feeling of anger at the other's attitude, had not this question shown him a loophole for expounding his favorite subject. He began to tell the Esthett, in elaborate detail, all the story of his mission. The latter listened attentively, so interested, apparently, that Tumithak grew more and more interested in the telling.

He spoke of his early life, of

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the finding of the book, and the inspiration it had given him; he told of the many years of preparation for his journey, and of the many adventures he had had since he left Loor.

The fat one was strangely interested, but to Tumithak, wrapped up in the story of his mission, it never once occurred that the Esthett was sparring for time. And so, when he was finished with his story at last, he was quite willing to listen to the Chosen One's story of his own life in the marble halls.

"We who live in these halls," began the Esthett, "are those chosen ones of the race of mankind who possess the one thing that the Holy Shelks lack—the power of creating beauty. Mighty as the Masters are, they have no artistic ability, but in spite of this they are quite capable of appreciating our art, and so they have come to rely upon us for the beauties of life, and they have given it to us to produce all the great works of art that decorate their wonderful palaces on the Surface! All the great art works that you see on the walls of these corridors have been executed by me and my fellow-citizens. All the rich paintings and statuary that you will see later, in our great square, all these are the rejected specimens that the Holy Shelks have no need of. Can you imagine the beauties of the accepted pieces that have found

their way up to the Surface?

"And in return for our beauty, the shelks feed us and give us every luxury imaginable. Of all mankind, we alone have been chosen as worthy of being the friends and companions of the world's masters."

He paused for a moment, breathless with what was apparently an exceptionally long speech, for him. After resting a while, he went on:

"Here in these marble corridors, we of the Esthetts are born and educated. We work only at our art: we work only when it suits us, and our work is carefully examined by the shelks, and the choicest is preserved. The artists who produce this work—listen carefully wild man—the artists who produce this work are called from their homes to join the great guild of Chosen Ones who live on the Surface and spend the rest of their lives decorating the glorious palaces and gardens of the Holy Shelks! They are the happiest of men, for they know that their work is praised by the very Lords of Creation themselves."

He was panting with the effort caused by his story, but he struggled bravely on:

"Can you wonder that we feel ourselves superior to the men who have allowed themselves to become little better than animals, little more than rabbits skulking in their warrens, miles below the

ground? Can you wonder that—"

His speech was suddenly cut off by a sound from the corridor without. It was the sound of a siren, whose tones grew shriller and shriller, higher and higher until it seemed to pass entirely beyond the range of sound heard by human ears. The Esthett was suddenly beside himself with eagerness. He began to struggle out of his bed, managed after several failures to get to his feet, waddled to the door and then turned.

"The Masters!" he cried. "The Holy Shelks! They have come to take another group of artists to the Surface. I knew they would be here soon, wild man, and it was not for nothing that I listened to your long, tiresome story. Try to escape if you can, but you know as well as I that none can escape from the Masters. And now I go to tell them of your presence!"

He slammed the door suddenly in Tumithak's face and was gone.

For several minutes, Tumithak remained motionless in the apartment. That shelks were so near to him seemed incredible. Yet he expected every minute to see the door open and to have the horrible spider-like creatures rush in and slay him. At last, it seemed, he was in a trap from which there was no escape. He shivered with fear, and then, as always, the very intensity of his fear shamed him

and caused him to take a new grip upon himself; and though he trembled violently at what he was about to do, he moved to the door and examined it carefully. He had decided that the chances of escape would be greater in the corridor than if he waited here for the shelks to capture him. It was several minutes before he discovered the secret of the latch, but then he swung the door open and stepped into the corridor.

The corridor in Tumithak's vicinity was fortunately empty, but far up the hallway, the obese Esthett could still be seen, bustling ponderously on his way. He had been joined by others, many as fat as he; and all were hastening, as fast as their weight would let them up the corridor, in the direction in which the square of the city evidently lay. Tumithak followed them at a discreet distance, and after a while, saw them turn into another corridor. He approached the corridor cautiously, the determination forming in his mind to slay the fat one that intended to betray him at the first opportunity. It was well that he used care in his approach, for when he peered around the corner he saw that he was not a hundred feet from the town's great square.

He had never seen such a great square. It was a huge hall over a hundred yards in diameter, its tessellated marble floor and carved

walls presenting an appearance that made Tumithak gasp in wonder. Here and there statues stood on vari-colored pedestals, and all the doorways were hung with beautiful tapestries. The entire square was almost filled with Esthets, over five hundred being present.

Not the hall, its furnishings nor its inhabitants had much effect on Tumithak. His eyes were occupied in observing the great cylinder of metal that lay in the center of the hall. It was just such a cylinder as the one he had seen on the carving when he first entered the city—eighteen or twenty feet long, mounted on four thickly tired wheels and having, he now perceived a round opening in the top.

While he looked, a number of objects shot out of the opening and dropped lightly before the crowd. One after another, just as jacks from a box, they leapt from the opening, and as they nimbly struck the ground the Esthets raised a cheer. Tumithak drew hastily back, and then, his curiosity overcoming his caution, dared to peep again into the hall. For the first time in over a hundred years, a man of Loor gazed upon a shelk!

Standing about four feet high, they were indeed spider-like, just as tradition said. But close look showed that this was only a superficial resemblance. For these creatures were hairless, and pos-

sessed ten legs, rather than the eight that belong to a true spider. The legs were long and triple jointed and on the tip of each was a short rudimentary claw much like a finger nail. There were two bunches of these legs, five on each side, and they joined the creature at a point midway between the head and the body. The body was shaped much like the abdomen of a wasp, and was about the same size as the head, which was certainly the strangest part of the entire creature.

For the head was the head of a man: The same eyes, the same broad brow, a mouth with tight, thin lips, and a chin—all these gave the head of the creature a startling resemblance to that of a man. The nose and hair alone were missing, to make the face perfectly human.

As Tumithak looked, they entered at once upon the business that had brought them down into the corridor. One of them took a paper from a pouch strapped to his body, grasping it nimbly between two of his limbs, and began to speak. His voice had a queer, metallic clack about it, but it was not a bit hard for Tumithak to distinguish every word he said.

"Brothers of the Pits," he cried, "the time has come for another group of you to make your homes on the Surface! The friends who left you last week are eagerly

awaiting your arrival there, and it only remains for us to call the names of the ones to whom the great honor has fallen. Listen carefully, and let each one enter the cylinder as his name is called."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in, and then in a silence that was impressive, he began to call the names.

"Korystalis! Vintiamia! Lathrumanid! he called, and one after another, great, bull-bodied men strutted forward and climbed up a small ladder that was lowered from the cylinder. The third man called, Tumithak noticed, was the one who had conversed with him in the apartment. The look on his face, as well as on the faces of the others, was one of surprise and joy, as if some incredible piece of good luck had befallen him.

Now Tumithak had been so absorbed in observing the shelks and their vehicle that he had forgotten momentarily the threat that the Esthett had made, but when he saw him approaching the shelks, the Loorian's terror returned. He stood, rooted in his tracks with fear. But his fear was unnecessary, for apparently this unexpected piece of good fortune had driven everything else from the simple mind of the Chosen One, for he climbed into the cylinder without so much as a word to the shelks standing about. And Tumithak gave a great sigh

of relief as he disappeared into the hole.

There were six shelks, and six Esthett's names were called; and as fast as they were called, their owners stepped forward and clambered, puffing and grunting, into the car. At last, the sixth had struggled down into the round opening and the shelks turned and followed. A lid covered the hole from below, and silence reigned in the hall. After a moment, the Esthetts began to drift away, and as several moved toward the corridor in which Tumithak was concealed, he was forced to dart back through the passage some distance and slip into an apartment to avoid discovery.

He half expected some Esthett to enter the apartment and discover him, but this time luck was with him and after a few moments, he peered cautiously through the door to find the corridor empty. He emerged and quickly made his way to the main hall. It was deserted of Esthetts, now, but for some reason the cylinder still remained in the same spot; and Tumithak was suddenly seized with an idea that made him tremble with its magnitude.

These shelks had obviously come from the Surface in this car! And now they were going back to the Surface in it. Had not the Esthett, whom the shelks named Lathrumidor, told him that occasionally artists were called to live upon

the Surface among the shelks? Yes, this car was certainly going to return to the Surface. And, with a sudden rush of inspired determination, Tumithak knew that he was going with it.

He hastened forward and in a moment was clinging to the rear of the machine, clambering for a foothold on the few projections he could find. He was not a moment too soon, for hardly had he gotten a firm grip on the machine than it leaped silently forward and sped at a vertiginous speed up the corridor!

Chapter VI The Slaying of the Shelk

Tumithak's memory of that ride was a wild kaleidoscopic jumble of incidents. So fast did the car speed, that it was only occasionally, as they slowed to turn a corner or passed through an exceptionally narrow hall, that he could lift his eyes and look about him.

They passed through halls more brilliantly lighted than any he had yet seen. He saw halls of metal, polished and gleaming, and corridors of unpolished rock where the vibration of passing over rough rock threatened to hurl him at any moment from his precarious position.

Once they passed slowly through a marble passageway where Exthetts were lined on either side, chanting a solemn

and sonorous hymn as the car of the shelks passed through. Tumithak was certain that he would be discovered, but if any of the singers saw him they paid little heed, evidently believing him to be a captive of the shelks. There were no longer any pits or branching hallways now, the entire road to the surface was one broad main corridor and along this corridor the car sped, carrying Tumithak ever nearer to his goal.

Although the car's speed was not great as measured by the speed of the cars we use today, it must be remembered that the fastest speed the Loorian had ever conceived was a fast run. So it seemed to him now that he rode upon the very wings of the wind, and his thankfulness knew no bounds when the car at last slowed to a speed that enabled him to drop to the ground in a section of the corridor that had apparently been uninhabited for many years. All thought of continuing the ride was abandoned now, his only desire was to end the devil's ride that he had so foolhardily undertaken.

For a moment, Tumithak was inclined to lie where he had fallen, at least long enough to regain control of his dazed faculties, but the sudden realization that the car of the shelks had stopped, not a hundred yards away, brought him instantly to his feet, and he flung himself hurriedly through

the nearest open door. The apartment in which he found himself was dustladen and bare of furniture; it was obvious that it had been long unused, and so, convinced that no danger awaited him there, Tumithak returned to the door and looked out at the car.

He saw at once that the queer door or hatchway in the top of the car was open, but it was several moments before the occupants began to emerge. Then the fat head of one of the Esthetts appeared and its owner laboriously dragged himself up and over the side of the car. He was followed by a shelk, who leaped nimbly to the ground, after which the car slowly emptied until all twelve of its occupants were in the corridor. They all turned, then, and entered an apartment, the only one visible that bore a curtain over the door.

For a while, Tumithak remained in his hiding place debating his next move. His instinctive timidity urged him to remain in hiding, to wait—for days, if necessary—until the shelks had re-entered the car and departed. His curiosity demanded that he attempt to discover what the strangely allied party was doing beyond that great tapestry-covered door. And his wisdom told him that if he intended to continue on his quest, the best course was to keep on at once up the corridor, while the shelks

were still within the apartment—for he knew that he was but a few short miles from the surface, toward which he had been traveling for so long.

His better judgment conquered at last and he chose the latter course, determined to forget the party, and so emerged from the room and began to run lightly and silently on his way; but as he passed the great doorway and saw how easily one might conceal himself in them, he determined to have one last look at the shelks and their strange friends before continuing. So, suiting the action to the thought, he stepped to the opening and, drawing the curtains around him, parted them slightly and looked into the room.

The first thing to strike his attention was the immense size of the room. It must have been eighty feet long and half as many wide, truly an enormous room to the Loorian; and its ceiling was lost in gloom. So high was it that the lights, which were arranged around the room at the level of the shoulder, were not bright enough to show any of its detail. Tumithak had a queer idea that there was no ceiling, that perhaps the walls rose higher and higher until at last they reached the Surface. He had little time to speculate on this possibility, however, for he had hardly noticed it when his eyes fell upon the table. A great low table, it was, a

long table covered with a cloth of snowy whiteness and piled high with strange articles that Tumithak saw were intended to be foods. But the Loorian looked at them in wonder, for they were foods such as he had never before heard of, such as his ancestors had not known for many a generation, the thousand and one succulent viands of the Surface. And around the table were a dozen low divans, and on some of these divans the Esthetts were even now reclining, greedily partaking of the varied foods.

The shelks, strangely enough were not joining them in the feast. Behind each of the ponderous artists, a shelk had taken his place, and to Tumithak's notion, there was something ominous in the way they stood, silently watching every move the Esthetts made. But the self-styled Chosen Ones were quite at ease, gobbling their food and grunting appreciative interjections to each other, until Tumithak turned from looking at them in disgust.

And then, suddenly, there came a sharp command from the shelk at the head of the table. The Esthetts looked up in consternation, dismay and a pitiable incredulity in their faces. Ere they could move, however, ere they could even cry out, on each a shelk had leaped, his thin-lipped mouth seeking, finding unerringly, the jugular vein beneath the folds of flesh in the fat one's heavy throat.

Vainly the artists struggled, their slow, helpless movements were unavailing, the nimble shelks easily avoiding their groping arms while all the time their teeth sank deeper into the flesh. Tumithak gasped in horror. As one in a trance, he watched the movements of the Esthetts become feebler until at last all motion ceased. The Loorian's brain was in a daze. What—what on Venus could be the meaning of this? What connection could this grisly scene have with the lengthy explanation of the lives of these people that Lathrumidor had given him in the marble halls below? He gazed at the scene in horror, unable to move his eyes.

The Esthetts were quiet now, and the shelks had raised themselves from them and were busy with some new occupation. From beneath the table they had drawn several large, transparent jars and half a dozen small machines with long hoses attached. These hoses were fastened to the wounds in the necks of the Esthetts and as Tumithak looked on he saw the blood swiftly pumped from the bodies and ejected into the jars.

As the jars filled with the liquid, the bodies of the Esthetts collapsed like punctured balloons, and in a few moments they lay, pallid and wrinkled, on the floor about the table. The shelks showed no excitement in their work; apparently it was

merely a routine duty with them, and their calm business-like methods served only to add to Tumithak's terror; but at last he overcame the paralytic fear that held him, and he turned and sped frantically away. Up the corridor he ran faster and faster, farther and farther, and at last, spent and breathless, unable to run another step, he darted into an open door and flung himself gasping and panting on the floor of the apartment it led into.

Slowly he regained control of himself, his breath returned, and with it some small measure of confidence. He berated himself harshly for his cowardice in so losing control of himself, yet, even as he did so, he trembled at the thought of the terrible sight that he had witnessed. As he grew calmer, he began to wonder at the meaning of the events that he had seen. Lathrumidor, the Esthett, had led him to believe that the shelks were the kindly masters of the immense artists. He had spoken of the journey to the Surface as being the culminating honor of an Esthett's life. The sherk who had spoken in the great hall, too, had intimated as much. Yet for some strange reason, at the first opportunity after leaving the city, the shelks had slain their worshiping servants, and slain them in a way that seemed quite usual and commonplace to them. Strive as he might, Tumithak could not

account for this apparent anomaly. And so, cowering in the rear room of the apartment, puzzling over the unnaturalness of the day's adventures, the Loorian fell into a troubled sleep.

It is not to be wondered that Tumithak was puzzled at the strange events of the day. He knew of no relationship between animals, such as existed between the Esthetts and the shelks. There were no domestic animals in the pits and man had not known of them for centuries. Other centuries were to go by before they were to know of them again, so there was nothing in Tumithak's life analogous to the status in which the shelks held the Esthetts.

Today we know that they were—cattle! Lulled into a sense of false security by hypocritical lies, bred for centuries for the full-blooded, bovine stupidity that was characteristic of them, allowed no means of intellectual expression except the artistic impulse which the shelks scorned, they had become, after many generations, the willing creatures of the Beasts of Venus.

And by a strange combination of the lies of the shelks and their own immense conceit, they had come to look forward, from earliest childhood, to that happy day when they would be taken to the Surface—to become, unknowing, the food of their masters. Such were the Esthetts, strangest, per-

haps, of all the various races of men evolved by the breeding of the shelks.

All this, however, was far beyond the comprehension of Tumithak—or of any man of his generation. And so it was that even after he awoke and resumed his journey, he was still unable to account for the strange relationship. But the puzzles which a semi-savage mind cannot solve, it soon forgets, and so it was that before long Tumithak was strolling along on his way, his mind entirely at ease.

Since passing the hall of the singing Esthetts, during his wild ride, Tumithak had seen no signs of habitation. Apparently the corridors were entirely too near the surface to be inhabited by man. So Tumithak saw no one in the corridors and traveled for several miles undisturbed. At last he came to an abrupt end of the passage, and here found a ladder of metal set into the wall that rose higher and higher in the gloom. Filled with a suppressed excitement, his heart beating noticeably again, Tumithak began the ascent of what he knew to be the last pit before he reached the surface. He emerged from it in a hall of strange black stone, and removing from his pouch the last of his father's gifts, he started along the upward slope, the weapon held gingerly in his hand. The corridor was narrower than any Tumithak had ever

seen, and as he walked along the walls drew still closer together, until it was not more than two feet wide. The grade became steeper and steeper and at last became a flight of stairs. Up these Tumithak strode, every moment his heart beating wilder, and at last he saw what he knew to be his goal. Far ahead, a light shone down in the corridor from above, a light far brighter and harsher than any of the lights of the corridors, and of a strange reddish tint. Tumithak knew, as he looked on it in awe, that the light was the light of the Surface.

He hurried forward; the ceiling became lower and lower and for the last few yards he was forced to stoop, and then, finally, he reached the top of the steps and found himself standing in a shallow pit, not more than five feet deep. He raised his head and a low gasp of absolute disbelief escaped from him.

For Tumithak had looked upon the Surface . . .

The vastness of the scene was enough to unnerve the Loorian. It seemed that he had emerged into a mighty room or hall, so tremendous that he could not even comprehend its immensity. The ceiling and walls of this room merged into each other to form a stupendous vault like an inverted bowl, which touched the floor of the vault at a distance so far away that it seemed ut-

terly incredible. And this ceiling and these walls in places were of a beautiful blue, the color of a woman's eyes. This blue glowed like a jewel, and was mottled with great billowy areas of white and rose, and as Tumithak looked he had a vague feeling that those enormous billowy spots were slowly moving and changing in shape.

Unable to take his eyes from the sky above him, Tumithak's wonder and awe began to turn into a great fear. The more he looked, the further away the great dome seemed to be, and yet, curiously and terribly, it seemed to be closing in on him, too. He was sure, after a moment, that the great billowy spots were moving, and he had a dreadful feeling that they were about to fall and crush him. Sick and terrified at the enormity of the scene before him, he darted back into the passageway and cowered against the wall, trembling with a strange, unreasoning fear. For, raised as he had been in the close confines of the corridor walls, living his whole life under the ground, Tumithak, when he first looked upon the Surface, became a victim of agoraphobia, that strange fear of open spaces, that in some people, even today, amounts to a disease.

It was nearly an hour before his reason was able to gain control over this strange fear. Had he come thus far, he argued with

himself, only to return because of the appearance of the Surface? Surely, if that mighty blue and cloudy vault was to fall, it would not have waited all these years just to fall on him. He took a deep breath, and reason prevailing at last, he again looked out upon the Surface.

But this time his eyes avoided the sky, and he directed his attention to the floor of the "room." In the vicinity of the pit this floor consisted of a thick brown dust, but not far away this dust was covered with a strange carpet consisting of thousands of long green hairs thickly matted together, completely hiding the dusty floor beneath. In the middle distance were a number of tall, irregular pillars whose tops were covered with a great huge bunch of green stuff, of the same color and appearance as the hairs of the carpet.

And then, as Tumithak looked beyond the grass and the trees, he beheld a wonder that surpassed the other wonders that he had seen, for hanging low in the dome above the trees was the light of the Surface, a brilliant, blinding orb that lit up, redly, all that vast space of the Surface.

Speechless with awe, Tumithak looked upon the sunset. Again came the dizzy, sickening rush of agoraphobia, but with it came a sense of beauty that made him forget his fear, and gradually

calmed him. After a while he turned his eyes and looked in the opposite direction; and there, towering high above him, were the homes of the shelks!

Full a dozen of the high towers were visible, obelisk-like they stood there, their metal walls gleaming redly in the light of the sinking sun. Very few of them stood perfectly erect, the strange unearthly artistic sense of the shelks causing them to be built at various angles from the perpendicular, some as much as thirty degrees. They were of varying heights, some fifty, some as much as two hundred feet high, and from their tops long cables hung, linking all the towers together. Windowless they were, and the only mode of ingress was a small round door at the bottom. Not one of all these towers was more than fifteen feet in circumference, so that they gave an appearance not unlike a bundle of huge needles.

For how long the Loorian gazed at these amazing scenes, he could not tell. Of all the wondrous sights, the strangest, to him, was the sunset, the gradual sinking of the great red light into what seemed to be the floor of the vast chamber. Even after the sun had disappeared, he remained gazing absorbedly at the walls, which still glowed redly where it had been . . . And then—

Tumithak had not heard a sound. Lost in wonder though he

was, his ears had remained instinctively on the alert, and yet he had heard nothing. Until suddenly there was a scratching, rustling noise behind him and a clattering, metallic voice barked staccato words of command.

"Get — back — in — that — hole!" it spat, and Tumithak's blood turned to water as he realized that a shelk had stolen up behind him!

The next second seemed a year to the Loorian. He turned to face the beast, and in that turning a thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He thought of Nikadur and Thupra, and of the many years that he had known them; he thought of his father and even of his little remembered mother; he thought, strangely enough of the huge Yakran that he had tumbled into the pit and of how he had bellowed as he fell. All these thoughts rushed through his mind as he turned and then his arm flew up to protect himself. Utterly instinctive, the action was; it seemed that he was not in control of his body at all. Something outside of him—greater than himself—caused him to flex his fingers, and as he did, the revolver, the last of his father's three strange gifts spat flame and thunder! As in a dream, he heard its spitting bark, once, twice, thrice—seven times; and into the shallow pit tumbled the dead body of the shelk!

For a moment, the hero stared at it dumbly. Then, as the realization that he had accomplished his mission came over him, a great feeling of exultation seized him. Quickly drawing his sword, he began to slash at the ten long finger-like legs of the shelk, humming, as he did so, the song that the Loorians sang when they marched against the Yakrans; and though there were strange, questioning clacks and clatters from the direction of the homes of the shelks, he methodically continued hacking until the head was free from the body.

Then, realizing that the voices of the shelks were much nearer, he stuffed the bleeding head into the bosom of his tunic, and sped like the wind down the steps of the corridor.

Chapter VII The Power and the Glory

Tumlook of Loor, the father of Tumithak, sat in the doorway of his apartment, gazing out into the corridor. It was a lonely life that he had led for the past few weeks, for although his friends had tried to cheer him with the customary optimistic chatter, he could see that they all believed that his son would never return. And indeed, it would have been a bold man that would argue that Tumithak had even so much as passed the city of Yakra.

Tumlook knew the opinions of

his friends and he was beginning to believe as they did, in spite of the fact that they did their best to make him think that they expected wondrous things of his son. Why, he wondered, had he ever let the youth depart on such a hopeless quest? Why had he not been more stern with him, and driven the idea out of his head while he was still young? So he sat and berated himself, in this hour just before the time of sleep, as the life of Loor passed by him in an irregular, intermittent stream.

After a while his face brightened a little. Coming down the hall toward him were the two lovers whose long friendship with Tumithak had made a bond that Tumlook felt that he had somehow inherited. Nikadur hailed him, and as they drew near, Thupra ran up and kissed him impulsively on the cheek.

"Have you heard aught of Tumithak?" she cried, the question that had been almost a form of greeting between them.

Tumlook shook his head.

"Is it likely?" he asked. "Surely after all these weeks, we must look upon him as dead."

But Thupra was not to be discouraged. Indeed, of all Loor, it is probably that she alone still maintained the confidence that amounted to a certainty that Tumithak was safe and would return in triumph.

"I think he will return," she

said now. "You know, we are sure that he reached Yakra. And has not Nennapuss told us of the huge giant that was found dead at the foot of the Yakran shaft? If Tumithak could conquer such a man as that, who could overcome him?"

"Thupra may be right," said Nikadur, gravely. "There are rumors in Nonone of a great panic in Yakra, during which a man of these corridors is supposed to have passed through the town. The rumors are vague and may be only gossip, but perhaps Tumithak did reach the dark corridors."

"Tumithak will return, I know," Thupra repeated. "He is mighty, and—" she paused. Far up the corridor, her ears caught a sound and she listened questioningly. Then Nikadur heard it, too, and last of all it reached the ears of Tumlook.

A shouting, a distant shouting that grew louder even as they listened. Several passing pedestrians heard it, too, and paused; and then two men turned and hastened off in its direction. The trio strained their ears in an endeavor to distinguish the meaning of the cries. Several more men came speeding up the corridor, running in the direction of the noise.

"Come," cried Nikadur suddenly, consternation written on his face. "If this be a raid of the Yakrans—" In spite of the cries

of Thupra, he sped off, and Tumlook hesitated only long enough to dart back into his apartment and arm himself before he followed.

Thupra, however, was not to be left behind. She caught up with Nikadur in a moment, and in spite of his protestations, persisted in going with him. And so the three, joined soon by many others, rushed on in the direction of the excitement.

A man passed them, running the other way. "What is it?" came a chorus of a dozen voices, but the man's only answer was an unintelligible gabble of words as he ran on. The crowd's ignorance was not to continue for long, though, for at the very next turn of the corridor, they beheld the cause of the tumult.

Down the corridor came marching an incredible procession. A group of Loorians led the parade, dancing and cheering like mad, while behind them came marching a well-known figure—Nennapuss, chief of the Nononese, with his retinue of officers. Nennapuss was followed by what must have been almost the entire population of Nonone, all gabbling and shouting madly to the Loorians whom they passed. It was not at the Nononese that the Loorians stared, however, but at the ones who followed them. Behind Nennapuss' men came a crowd of Yakrans, each carrying aloft a white cloth on a stick that still,

after so many hundreds of years, denoted a truce. Datto was there, the burly chief of the Yakrans, and his huge nephew, Thopf, and many others of whom the Loorians had heard from the Nononese, and there, high on the shoulders of two of the mightiest Yakrans, was riding—Tumithak!

But when the eyes of the Loorians looked upon Tumithak, they looked no further. For the sight they beheld was so incredible that it seemed impossible to believe that they were not dreaming.

He was dressed in garments that, to their eyes, were beautiful beyond telling. They were of the finest texture imaginable, sheer gauzes that were dyed in the most delicate shades of nacreous pinks and greens and blues. They flowed down over his form, clinging to his body and giving him all the appearance of a god. Around his head was a metal band not unlike a crown, such a band as legend said the king shelks were wont to wear.

And, most unbelievable of all, he held his arm aloft, and in his hand was the wrinkled head of a shelk!

Tumlook, Nikadur and Thupra never knew when they joined the crowd. One moment they were rushing down the corridor toward the incredible procession, the next, it had absorbed them and they, too, were a part of the howl-

ing, enthusiastic mob that fought and laughed its way toward the great square of Loor.

They reached the crossing of the two main corridors and formed an immense crowd with Tumithak and the Yakrans in its center. The crowd continued its chattering and cheering for some moments and then Tumithak, mounting the stone pedestal that had long been used for speakers, held up his hand for silence. Quiet reigned almost instantly, and in the lull, the voice of Nennapuss, that instinctive master of ceremonies, could be heard.

"Friends of Loor," he cried. "Today is the day that will live forever in the archives of the three cities of the lower corridors. It has been unnumbered years since the three cities have all met on a friendly footing, and to bring that about it has taken an event so incredible that it is well-nigh impossible to believe. For at last a man has slain a shelk—"

He was interrupted by the booming voice of Datto, the much-decorated chief of the Yakrans.

"Enough of this talk," he shouted. "We are here to do honor to Tumithak, the Loorian, who has slain a shelk. Let us shout and sing songs in his praise. Let us bow to him, Nennapuss, we who are chiefs, let us call upon the chiefs of Loor to bow to him also, for who could slay a shelk if he were not far greater than we."

Nennapuss looked a little nettled at having been interrupted at his favorite pastime, but before he could answer, Tumithak began to speak. And at his word, Yakran and Nononese alike listened with respect.

"Fellow Loorians," he began. "Brothers of Nonone and Yakra, it was not for honor that I journeyed to the Surface and slew the beast whose head I hold in my hand. Since I was a boy I have felt that men could fight with shelks. It has been the ambition of my life to prove that fact to everyone. Surely no citizen of Loor was less of a fighter than I. Many, indeed, have scorned me for a mere dreamer of dreams. And I assure you that I was little more. Can you not see that man is not the weak, insignificant creature that you seem to think? You Yakrans have never cowered in fear when the men of Loor came against you! Loorians, have you ever trembled in your apartments when the Yakrans raided your halls?

"Yet the cry of 'Shelk!' will send you all fleeing panic-stricken to your homes! Can you not see that these shelks, although mighty, are only mortal creatures like yourselves? Listen to the story of my deeds, now, and see if I have done aught that you could not have done."

He took up the recital of his adventures. He told of the passing of Yakra, and though the

Loorians cheered a bit there was silence among the people of Yakra, and then he told of the dark corridors, and the Yakrans, too, cheered as he recited his story of the slaying of the dogs. He told of the halls of the Esthetts, and in glowing colors described to them the beauties there, hoping that he might arouse in them the desire to possess these beauties.

And then he tried to tell them of the Surface, but here words failed him; it was hardly possible, in the limited vocabulary of the corridors, to tell of the slaying of the shelk, and at last the story of his return.

"For some reason the shelks did not follow me," he said, "and I reached the first halls of the Esthetts in safety. And here I was discovered, and had to fight a battle with a half dozen of the fat ones before I could go farther. I slew them all," Tumithak, in that sublime unconscious conceit of his, failed to say how easy it had been to slaughter his huge opponents, "and taking from them these garments, continued on my way.

"I came again to the dark corridors, but even here no one opposed me. Perhaps the terrible smell of shelk was so great that the savages feared to come near me. So at last I came to Yakra, and found that the woman whom I had met on my upward journey had told her story to Datto, the chief, who was ready and eager

to do me honor on my return home. And so I came to Nonone, and after a time to Loor.

He ceased his story, and again the crowd broke into cheers. The cheers increased, echoed back against the walls until the great hall rang like a bell. "Great is Tumithak of the Loorians!" They cried, "Great is Tumithak, slayer of shelks!" And Tumithak folded his arms and drank in the praise, forgetful for the moment that his entire mission had been to prove that it did not take a great man to kill a shelk.

After a while, the tumult began to die and the voice of Datto was heard again.

"Loorians," he shouted. "For many, many years, the men of Yakra have fought unending war with the men of Loor. Today that war ceases. Today we have found a Loorian who is greater than all Yakrans, and so we fight with Loor no more. And to prove that I speak truth, Datto bows in allegiance to Tumithak!"

Again the cheers, and at last Nennapuss arose.

"It is a good thing that you have done, O Datto," he said, "and truly Tumithak is a chief of chiefs if there ever was one. Now there has been little enmity between Loor and Nonone in the past, and so our cases are different. For it is said that in the olden days, the people of Loor and Nonone were one. Thus, we hear of the days of the great

chief, Ampithat, who ruled—"here Datto whispered something fiercely into his ear, and the Nononese flushed and went on, "But enough of that. Suffice it that Nennapuss, too, bows to Tumithak, chief of chiefs and chief of Nonone."

Again there was a great demonstration and after a while, Datto began to speak again. Would it not be a seemly thing, he asked frowning fiercely, for the Loorians to recognize Tumithak as their chief also, thus making him king of all the lower corridors? The Loorians raised a cheer, and then Tagivos, the eldest of the doctors, arose to speak.

"The people of Loor have a government somewhat different from that of Nonone and Yakra," he said. "We have not had a chief for many years. However, it might be a good thing for the three towns to be united and so I will call a meeting of the council to decide on it."

The council was soon grouped together; Tagivos, Tumlook and old Sidango leading them, and after a while they announced that they were agreed to recognize Tumithak as their chief also. And so, amid wild cheering, that made it utterly impossible to distinguish a word that was said, Tumithak became chief of all the lower corridors.

Datto and his huge nephew, Thopf, the foremost of the Yakrans, were the first to swear al-

legiance to him, then he accepted the fealty of Sidango, Tagivos and the other Loorians. It gave Tumithak a queer feeling to touch the sword of his father and to hear his oath, but he maintained his dignified bearing, and treated Tumlook in just the same fashion as the others, until the ceremony was over. Then he called for attention.

"Friends of the lower corridors," he said. "A new day dawns for man today. It has been over thirty years since we have visited these corridors and in all those years men have almost forgotten the arts of war. We have lived in a spirit of slothful peace, while above us the enemies of all mankind have grown stronger and stronger. But in making me your chief, you have ended that era of peace and brought upon yourselves new lives of action. I will not be a peaceful ruler, for I, who have seen so much of the world, will not be content to skulk idly in the deepest corridor. Already I plan to lead you against the savages of the dark corridors, to claim those halls as our own, and to fill them with the lights that still gleam in the deserted corridors that we no longer use.

"And if we conquer those savages, I shall take you against the huge Esthetts to show you what beauty can do for the life of man. And the time will surely come, if the High One be willing,

when I shall lead you against the shelks themselves, for what I have done, every one of you can do, and shall do.

"And if anyone feels that the task I call upon you to do is too great, let him speak now for I will not rule over man against his will."

Again the cheers broke out, and gathered volume, and rang from wall to wall of the great square. In the excitement and enthusiasm of the moment, there was not a man in all the crowd that did not feel that he, too, might become a slayer of shelks.

And while they cheered and sang, and worked themselves into a frenzy, Tumithak stepped down from the stone and strode off in the direction of his home.

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By WALLACE WEST AND RICHARD BARR

Even if Dr. Karl Weinkopf—the central character in this fine Wallace West-Richard Barr collaboration—does maintain a secret laboratory in his basement where he broods over pike and salmon centuries old, we wouldn't want you to think that "Methuselah, Ltd." is anything at all like those Mad Scientist atrocities that keep turning up on the Late-Late Show. Because for one thing, although Dr. Weinkopf may look fifty, he's really almost twice that age, and for another, he happens to be practicing medicine at a time when all operations—even a tonsilectomy—are strictly forbidden—under penalty of death!

RATS!" Dr. Karl Weinkopf yanked off his smock and hurled it into a corner. "Mice! Guinea pigs! Fish! One moth-eaten ape! How can a man conduct decent experiments with such miserable specimens?"

He was growling so ferociously that the inhabitants of cages lining the walls of his makeshift laboratory hushed their squeaking. As though caught in some fault, the chimpanzee thrust an apologetic paw through the bars.

His rage abating, Weinkopf shook hands solemnly with the little fellow. Then he turned to study a pike that was trying to break through a glass partition so it could make a meal of the fat salmon in the same tank.

"There's our answer, Chimpo," the physician told the monkey.

"Piker is 213 years old today if that tag on his tail doesn't lie. Sammy will be 105 come next January . . . if that partition holds. God alone knows the age of this wretched Italian carp. He may have been eating rebellious slaves in some patrician's pool back in Nero's day."

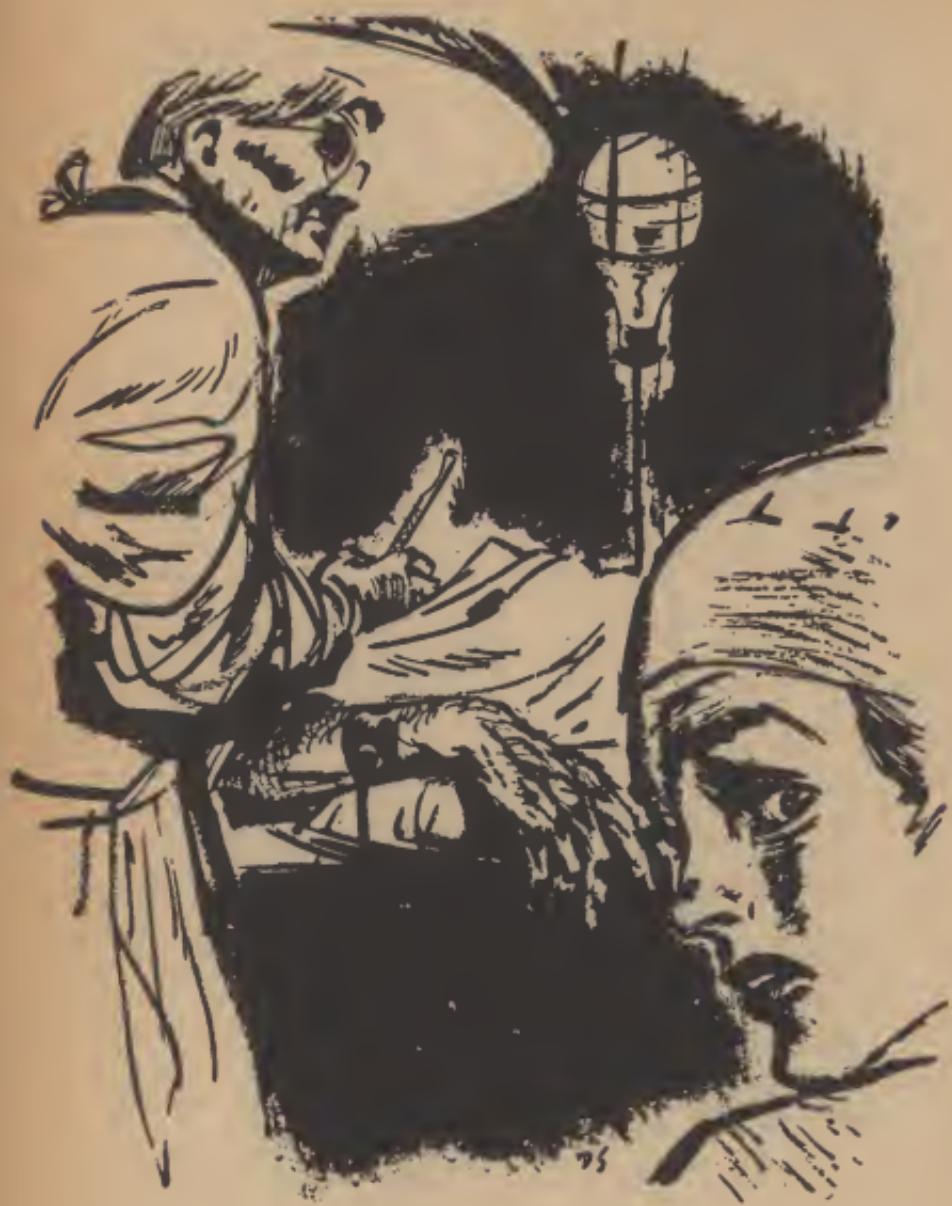
Weinkopf poked a spatulate finger into the tank; jerked it back in time to escape amputation as the pike made a white-toothed lunge.

"Told you," he said with a lopsided grin. "Piker's as spry as ever."

A nurse, whose costume set off a well-rounded, long-legged body, stuck her curly brown head through the lab door.

"Did you call, doctor?"

"No . . . Yes!" He studied



her as though she were a particularly succulent guinea pig. "How old are you, Miss Lara?"

"Why . . ." She blushed as only girls with freckles can. "I'm over 21."

"Tut! Mine was a scientific inquiry."

"Fifty . . . three, sir." The nurse looked ready to burst into tears as she confessed an age that belied her looks by a full quarter century.

"Humph! And how old would you guess that I am?"

"I . . . I never had thought about it," she lied. "It's not polite to guess at ages."

"Be impolite then!"

"Maybe . . ." She stared at the floor. "Say forty-five. Fifty at most."

"Thank you." Unconsciously he straightened his archaic bow tie. "I'm eighty-eight."

"No!" She looked at him now; at his athletic figure, hawk nose, blond hair untouched by grey, unlined skin. There was a great pity in her blue eyes.

"You know what that means? I have another two, three, possibly five years."

"No!" She put slim hands to her throat. "You're America's best diagnostician. It's not right."

"Chances are 99 out of 100 I'll be dead as a mackerel . . . no, not a mackerel . . . dead as a mouse within five years. But this fellow won't be dead!" He pointed

at the pike as Consuelo Lara stood stricken. "If my successor keeps him free of parasites, doesn't let him tangle with the carp, and feeds him properly, Piker will live indefinitely."

"When I was a little girl," the nurse giggled, "we sang about how 'fish never perspire.' So they don't expire either. From old age, I mean."

"Rather like songs in that respect." He regarded her curiously. "The one you referred to dates from the Gay 1890's, doesn't it?"

"I wouldn't know." There was that telltale blush again. "But tell me, doctor, why don't fish die of old age?"

"They never got in the habit of it."

"But humans did?" she puzzled as he donned his old fashioned coat and motioned for her to precede him up the basement stairs while he double-locked the lab door.

"All animals seem to have got that habit about the time they crawled out of the sea," he replied as they reached his private office and he began leafing through his appointment book. "Hmmm. So Bobby Jones chopped off his right forefinger again, did he? The masochistic little beast."

"Yes, doctor. I signed your name to a routine order sending him to the Life Ray Clinic. His monkeyshines are getting monotonous, don't you think?"

"Definitely. Tomorrow I'll recommend psychiatric treatment for him and maybe his parents as well. You told them to bring him here weekly until the finger has grown back, of course?"

"Of course." She fluffed her bright hair and put on her street coat over the uniform. "But you were saying . . . about the old age habit?"

"Oh yes. The going was rough when the first vertebrates crawled up on shore. Food was scarce. And the poor, soft things must have dehydrated in the boiling sunshine. Some of them, like the whales, scrambled back into the womb of mother sea, regaining their immortality at the expense of further evolution. Whatever consciousness the others had wouldn't admit defeat. They continued to flap around. If they escaped starvation or a violent death they eventually wrinkled up and died . . . from frustration maybe. And they passed that frustration along to their offspring."

* "You mean that's the reason why, even at birth, a baby's hands, feet and face have age lines on them?"

"Smart girl! Where did you pick that up? . . . Hello! What's this? 'Adelaide Hawley: Catarrhal inflammation of the intestines; enlargement of Peyer's patches; eruption on the abdomen and

chest of rose-colored spots; diarrhea.' What's the fool woman been doing? Drinking branch water straight? Those are symptoms of typhoid fever."

"Amazing, isn't it? New York's first recorded case of typhoid in a century and a half. I should have sent her to the Clinic, I suppose, but she's still ambulatory. I told her to come back tomorrow so you could see for yourself."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Miss Lara. Have to give up my experimental work, I suppose."

"Excuse me, doctor." The nurse linked her fingers and twisted them nervously. "Of course it's none of my business, but what kind of experiments are you doing down there?"

Weinkopf cocked his handsome head and studied her quizzically.

"Well," he said finally, "I suppose I owe you a truth for a truth. But you must promise never to breathe a word of it within a mile of a Medicop."

"I promise."

"I'm doing some surgical work . . . vivisection, in fact."

"Surgery!" She backed away from him until she bumped into a wall. "But that's forbidden."

"Quite."

"You're a criminal!"

"Among other things. You may resign if you desire, but I have your promise not to inform on me."

"Oh no." She pressed the knuckles of her fists to her mouth. "I'll never leave you. Never! But why risk euthanasia for the sake of cutting up a few guinea pigs?"

"I'm trying to break a habit." "A habit? You mean. . . ?"

"My dear." He walked over to where she cowered and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I know you're in love with me. Don't forget that you said I was the best diagnostician in America. I also know it wouldn't be hard for me to fall in love with you . . . if I had a few more years to live. So bear with me and my criminal tendencies." He kissed her quickly and stalked out of the office.

Hands deep into his pockets against the October evening chill, Dr. Weinkopf walked southward through East River Park in the direction of the New Jersey Monorail station. What a fool, at his age, to be thinking about a woman. He must be as flighty as his name implied.

But he wasn't old, physically . . . not a day older than when he had matured at thirty or so. No lesions. No disease damage. No hardening arteries. No degeneration of function. The Life Ray saw to that.

Within two to five years, nevertheless, his circulation would slow; his heart action would become erratic and feeble. One fine morning, unless he went mad first, he would be found dead in bed "of

natural causes" as the front page obituaries put it. "Unnatural, bullheaded, stupid, atavistic causes" would be better.

"Why?" he snarled at a squirrel. It flirted its tail and skittered through the fallen leaves.

Yes, why? It had all started with Ponce de Leon's deadly search for the Fountain of Youth. Then there had been the half-mythical, half-mad Dr. Carrel. He had kept animal tissues alive in sterile nutrient solutions for some fantastic period. That had led to the growing of chickens and other animals in germ-free cages and finally to the idiotic episode of the Incubator Man. He, too, Weinkopf recalled with a grimace, had chased after a skirt in his young-old age — and had died of measles, or something similar, a few days after escaping from his "incubator."

Long before that though, in the 1940's, Dr. Waksman dug up streptomycin and the other antibiotics which eventually eradicated disease. The final step had come in the '90's when Paiewonsky had crowned Professor Scott's painstaking lifework on the regeneration of human tissues by building the first Life Ray machine . . . the still half-understood gadget that somehow made it possible for a human, like a lizard, to regrow a severed leg or repair any other damaged organ,

from a liver to a pituitary gland.

"And what was the result of those and other wonders?" he asked a lamp post.

Life expectancy at birth crept from a meagre 45 years in 1900 to 68 in 1950 and to 70 a decade later. In the peaceful One World of the final third of a century it jumped to 80 despite alarming increases in the accident rate and in degenerative diseases, such as arteriosclerosis, that could not be traced to germs or viruses.

After use of the regenerative Life Ray machines became universal around 2003, expectancy hit 90.

But at that point, when the age-old dream of immortality seemed on the verge of becoming a reality, the expectancy curve flattened out. Men and women matured in their thirties. They maintained their good looks and vitality for some 60 years more. Then, for no apparent reason, they just lay down and died as though their life clocks had become unwound.

A pitiful minority lived a few years beyond four score and ten, although none approached the record age of 169 set in England by Henry Jenkins back in 1670. They didn't even threaten the American mark of 145 made in 1895 by Dr. William Hotchkiss of St. Louis. Others failed to reach the nine decade limit: Large numbers continued to be killed out-

right in accidents, or to commit suicide.

"But on balance," Dr. Weinkopf addressed the rows of skyscrapers to his right, "babies born in this year of grace 2098 can expect to live not a day longer than those who saw the light in 2003.

"It doesn't make sense," he growled, ignoring the glances of passersby. "Somewhere in the human body there must be a gland, a chain of reflexes, perhaps an ancestral memory path, that turns the furnace off when it believes the organism has outlived its usefulness. I know where it is. If I could work in an oldfashioned hospital surgery for a little while I could find and eliminate it."

He felt keyed up and angry; not in the mood for a swooping journey to his Jersey farm. He needed a drink. And somebody to drink with. How about Harrison? Not the best company in the world, but he was certain to be puttering around his office. Bachelors always did that, especially when they were going to be pushing up daisies in a year or two. . . .

"Lo, Karl," Weinkopf's lean and mournful host did not bother to rise from his desk or even to separate the fingers which he held, tent-fashion, across his narrow chest. "Dial for the drinks, will you? I'm spent."

"What's the trouble this time,

Neil?" The visitor pressed buttons and, when the frosted Scotches arrived, placed one in front of Harrison.

"One of my most lucrative patients . . . that Mrs. Peyton of the Park Avenue Peyton's I've told you about . . . insisted on having an operation; an appendectomy, to be exact. If that couldn't be arranged she was willing to settle for a tonsil job. She just left." He drank deeply.

"Masochism? I have a nasty case, too." The Scotch tasted suddenly flat.

"Not this time. You see, Mrs. Peyton reads books."

"I don't understand." Karl lit his pipe, another anachronism he liked to affect.

"Old books," the other amended. "She ran across a dogeared tome by some Englishman named Wodehouse. Ever hear of him?"

"Can't say I have."

"Well, it seems he wrote light novels about lightminded people. One such element was always talking about her symptoms and her operations. Mrs. Peyton would like to relieve the tedium of her life by doing likewise."

"Of course you told her that operations are illegal . . . that the penalty for any doctor caught performing one is euthanasia."

"I told her. She replied that she was willing to pay a thousand LH for the thrill."

"You were firm?"

"I was adamant . . . until she said she was going to change physicians . . . that a friend had told her about an oh-so-sympathico Dr. Weinkopf up on the East River Drive. I couldn't allow her to tempt you with a thousand free Labor Hours, could I?"

"Perhaps not . . . Shall we have two more of these?"

"Naturally. And make 'em doubles this time."

"So?" asked Weinkopf when the order popped out of its pneumatic tube.

"So I'm going to operate. I need an expensive vacation."

"You? You can't even open an oyster without cutting yourself. And even if you were a surgeon, where are you going to get instruments, anesthetics, a nurse you can trust, even an operating table, without having the Medicops down on you?"

Harrison tapped his fingertips together lazily.

"Ever hear of the S.P.S.T?" he asked.

"That bunch of sadists?" Weinkopf stared in genuine horror. "Oh come now, Neil. A joke's a joke. Besides, the Medicops euthed the last of that gang three years ago."

"Don't believe anything you read in the newspapers. The Ancient and Dishonorable Society for the Preservation of Surgical Techniques is still around. In

fact, I am a member in bad standing."

Weinkopf tossed his second drink into the disposall, untasted, and stood up.

"I'll be going," he said stiffly.

"Oh, come now, Karl. Stop acting like a conditioned reflex."

"I have a well-paying, legitimate practice. At my age I don't intend to jeopardize it by having the slightest contact with any subversive group."

"Legitimate practice" Harrison mimicked him. "'At my age.' 'Subversive.' Point one: If your practice is legitimate, what are you doing with a secret lab? Point two: At your age any man in his right mind shouldn't give much of a damn what happens to him, particularly if he felt there was an outside chance of keeping alive indefinitely. Point three: Remember the old story they tell on Abe Lincoln. 'Mr. President,' some wag once said to him, 'if you call a tail a leg, how many legs has a dog?' 'Four,' Honest Abe answered promptly. 'Calling a tail a leg don't *make* it a leg.'"

"Now order up another drink and sit down!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Karl mumbled as he obeyed.

"I'm saying just this: The Society has its quota of sadists and crackpots but it isn't subversive just because the newspapers, the medical journals, the Medicops

and even the government say it is. You'd realize that if you used the nonsense eliminator you carry around between your ears."

"But . . ."

"You know as well as I do that there's already one way of beating this death sentence we're facing . . . I'm in my eighties, too, remember."

"You mean the Life Sculptors." Weinkopf grimaced. "Oh, sure. If I had a million or so LH and swung enough political influence, the bio-chemists and their ilk could graft a new heart and a few other organs into me and keep me ticking for quite a while. What's that got to do with it?"

"Do you think the Big Shots who beat the death rap are anxious to share their luck with the commonality?"

"Naturally not. As it is, they run the show. If everyone's life span equalled theirs . . ." Mechanically, he retrieved his new drink and drained it.

"That's one point . . . Let's order dinner sent up, Karl. We have a lot to talk about. How would you like filigreed Yar? It's prime this month." Harrison stirred himself to poke fastidiously at the keyboard connecting his office with the building restaurant.

"The other point is," he continued, "that the Powers-That-Be know the ghost of Malthus might be breathing down their

necks again if the life span is increased. Today they have a peaceful, stagnant solar system where production balances consumption. Say you double life expectancy. Probably you double population in a generation or so. Then the government would have to get off its tail and put real steam behind Interstellar. Can't have that!"

"I see what you mean." Weinkopf was overtaxing the air conditioner with blue clouds of tobacco smoke. "But why tell me all this? I might . . ."

"No you mightn't. I know about that secret lab of yours, remember."

"How did you find out?"

"How do you suppose?"

"Connie! But she promised."

"She promised not to report you to the Medicops. Connie is one of us. Wields a mean scalpel herself. She's been trying to get a blackmail line on you since you hired her."

"Blackmail!"

"Um." The big tube burped. Harrison sat, completely relaxed, as his guest removed the dishes, unsealed them and arranged food on the desk. "I'll be frank with you, Karl," he resumed after he had sampled the Yar. "The Society has reached a dead end. We've been barking up the wrong Tree of Life. We had a theory . . . those of us on the 'inside,' you understand . . . that old age

was a disease, or maybe a slow starvation. For years we thought that some property in sea water . . . some chemical related to iodine, perhaps . . . was necessary to the indefinite prolongation of life. We've spent fortunes on analyses and experiments. We've got exactly nowhere."

"Where did you get the fortunes to spend?"

"From well-to-do sadists who get a kick out of watching illicit surgery. Here. Have some of this. It's delicious."

"Thanks. I'm not hungry. And now?"

"Now, when Connie called and told me you were working the other side of the street I had a hunch you might drop by. So I baited my best mousetrap."

"I wish you'd stop talking in riddles!" Weinkopf poked at his food.

"Very well. You, I gather, have developed a new line of attack. You believe old age is a mere habit. Let me make a guess and say you think senile death is an inherited tendency; a neural circuit set up ages ago when, if the species was to survive, organisms had to be disposed of after they stopped procreating. Couldn't waste good food on non-producers. Right?"

"Right." Weinkopf poured coffee and looked at his friend with new respect.

"Today human organisms no

longer wear out or lose their ability to procreate. But eventually, at around age 90, the old chain still clicks from force of habit. You've convinced yourself of *that* by vivisecting your little pets. But you can't prove it works with humans, or find a way of short-circuiting the chain, without doing real brain surgery."

"Of course not." Weinkopf's face had grown tense and white but the hand that held his coffee cup remained steady. "I know just what I'm after. In the old days I could have nailed it down with some post-mortems and a series of simple leucotomies on senile patients. But now, if a person is killed in an accident, or passes away in the so-called normal manner, the cadavers are cremated in a matter of hours. And people don't become senile in the clinical sense. I'll never have a chance to prove my theory."

"You will if you string along with me, Connie, and the real leadership of the S.P.S.T."

Weinkopf stared at the dregs in the bottom of his cup.

"All right," he said at last. "But how do I become a member? I thought an applicant had to bring a patient with him . . . one willing to undergo surgery."

"I'll forego that expensive vacation. Mrs. Peyton is yours. She's 90, you know."

"What if she talks?"

"She won't. That's one thing in our favor. The punishment for one who undergoes surgery is the same as for one who performs an operation. She wants to make a splash, not die under a cloud."

"It's not ethical." Weinkopf began pacing the floor.

"Is it ethical to slip laws into the statute books forbidding medical research? Is it ethical to condemn millions to death each year if there's a chance that life could be prolonged by such research? Is it ethical to freeze a civilization into *status quo*?"

"But the Hippocratic Oath . . . One slip and she'd die."

"If you'd rather not," Harrison looked at him under heavy lids, "I won't insist. No. You run along. I'll try a prefrontal lobotomy on Mrs. Peyton."

"Not prefrontal!" the other shouted. "Good God! You'd surely kill her." He saw that Neil was laughing. "All right," he said with a sickly grin. "You win."

During the week that elapsed before his scheduled initiation into the S.P.S.T., Dr. Weinkopf performed his regular duties in a perfunctory manner. He spoke to his nurse only when necessary and then in monosyllables. He was equally brusque with patients.

"Pain in your left side? Legs ache? Humph! Here's a ticket for the Life Ray. Three exposures

daily after meals. Intensity 3.8. That will be 25 LH. Goodbye."

He read the riot act to Bobby Jones and his neurotic parents. After their trembling departure he ventured to hope that, if Bobby were tempted to try another auto-amputation, he would experiment on his nasty little head.

He got Adelaide Hawley's typhoid in and out of the clinic in short order. And he came to detest the gushing, stupid, pretty Mrs. Peyton.

"Sure you want to go through with this?" he asked her once.

"Oh yes, doctor. Only surgery can help me. I've been and *been* to the clinic and I still feel terrible. I was saying to Anne just the other day . . . Anne's my gran . . . Anne's my *daughter*, Dr. Weinkopf . . . that I'll go *mad* if I don't find relief."

"Hmmm. What are your symptoms? Headaches?"

"Oh yes. Frightful headaches." She pressed beringed hands to her cranium.

"Here?" He touched her touched-up blond hair back of the right ear.

"Yes. How did you know? You're wonderful. Dr. Harrison never . . ."

"Sounds like a tumor."

"Is that bad?" Her pale eyes lost their boredom.

Could be. Its removal wouldn't hurt a bit though. You could watch me in a mirror if I operated

under local anesthesia. Although," he added hastily, "I still think the Life Ray could do the job better."

"Won't it hurt just a *little* bit? I've never been hurt in all my life."

"Perhaps I could arrange that."

"Then it's all settled." She jumped up and clapped her hands like a girl. "You make all the arrangements. And, oh yes, here is that release." She handed it to him and fairly skipped from the office.

The diagnostician sighed, tore the worthless release into pieces and resumed study of his precious dog-cared Gray's Anatomy. He knew that he was not a surgeon; merely a good veterinarian. He could operate on the lower animals with perfect aplomb. But would his hands shake; would he become panicstricken when he attempted a subtemporal on a human? Yet Mrs. Peyton was only the dred of a woman. And, if he succeeded, he might extend her life for many years . . . worthless years.

"Miss Lara," he called.

"Yes, doctor?" She came meekly from the reception room.

"What will Mrs. Peyton do with an extra hundred years?" he snapped at her.

"That's not the proper question," Connie answered gravely. "Mrs. Peyton has been walking around dead for the past 60 years. She fluttered toward a doctor like a moth to the flame. Subcon-

sciously, she wants to get the farce over with so she can crawl into her grave."

"Not a bad diagnosis." He had to admire the girl despite her spying.

"The real question is . . ." She thrust out a dimpled chin, ". . . what you and the minority of people like you could do with that extra century."

"What could I do!" he breathed. "I'd have time to learn something; to become a scientist instead of a dilettante pecking at grains of wisdom like a rooster in a barnyard. But it bothers me that, if I succeed, I'll make it possible for the walking dead to come along for the ride. They won't grow mentally. Won't they impede evolution? They will remain young in appearance. They may have a worse influence on humanity than those dreadful Struldburgs that Dean Swift wrote about — the people who never died but kept growing more and more senile and helpless as the ages passed."

"It has always been that way," she shrugged. "The first caveman to build a fire helped a lot of ballast to keep from freezing or dying from indigestible food. But he also kept himself, his wife and his bright children alive a little longer so they could evolve farther than they otherwise would have done."

"You're right," he said grudg-

ingly. "But another thing worries me. If old age is a habit, or even a disease or hormone deficiency, why haven't some people been immune to it? The race owes its existence to the fact that a few people always were immune to, or survived, bad habits and diseases as horrible as the dancing mania or the Black Plague that swept Europe in the Middle Ages."

"I suspect that some people are immune to old age," she said. "Consider the Count of St. Germaine, Ambrose Pierce and Daniel Boone. Just try to find out when any of them died. A man doesn't advertise that he is supremely different from his fellows. They'd tear him up."

"Are you one of those?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" She blushed furiously.

"Cleopatra revived from the asp?" he teased. "Madame Pompadour feigning tuberculosis to escape the stupidities of Louis XV's court?"

"Pompadour with freckles?" she sniffed.

"My dear, the most beautiful woman I ever knew had a freckle on her left flank."

"You've been peeking!" she stormed.

Suddenly they were shouting with laughter. The coldness between them was forgiven and forgotten too.

A November wind with a prom-

ise of snow behind it was blowing Dr. Weinkopf through piles of dead leaves a week later to keep his rendezvous. He stopped under a street light to stare at those leaves, all headed away from the wind in rows of appalling regularity. They knew where they were going — into the East River. But where was he going?

If successful, he would revolutionize a world.

If he failed? He was acquainted with the S.P.S.T. rules. Neil had seen to that. If he failed, he climbed on the operating table himself. The Society buried its failures as certainly as old-time surgeons had done. That was its protection against exposure to the Medicops.

Was he up to it? He decided that he was. He would show them what any fool could have seen a century ago — if fools ever bothered to look beyond their noses.

He turned into a skyscraper entrance and walked down three flights of stairs. He rapped on the third door to the right. Two raps. Pause. Three more.

"Who comes in peace?"

"Brother Ambrose." He felt like one of the fools he had been jeering at.

"Enter, Brother."

A shadowy figure in a dunce cap that fell to the shoulder slapped a similar disguise on his head.

"Follow, Brother."

They traversed a corridor and, after another ritual, entered a dazzling room fitted up as a theater. Around a space holding operating table, surgical apparatus, oxygen equipment and a sterilizer, rose tiers of benches occupied by hooded figures. Why, thought the newcomer, a good percentage of the doctors in Manhattan must be present!

He was escorted to a seat on the innermost bench. He had thought that his was to be the star performance of the evening, but an operation already was in progress. It was a lithotomy on a young woman.

The hooded physician handled the instruments with a certain amount of skill. Yet there was too much blood in evidence for him to have had extensive experience. Once the attending nurse dropped a scalpel and had to fish through the sterilizer for a substitute.

"I will now," said the surgeon in an uncertain voice, "make this cut by the side of the anus into the perianæum . . . There!" He applied clamps with fingers that twitched.

"Staff!"

This time the nurse did not fail him.

"Now," the man under the floodlights gulped, "I will reach in, divide the urethra and neck of the bladder and introduce this grooved, curved staff into the

bladder itself. The groove serves as a guide for my knife."

The nurse handed the instrument. The incision was made. The amateur inserted those trembling fingers to feel for the stone, stammering some explanation as he did so. He tried forceps, withdrew them and tossed them into the sterilizer. Swaying on his feet, he stitched frantically.

Weinkopf's lips curled.

The botched job done, the victim was wheeled away.

The man in the arena fainted.

"Well, gentlemen," said Dr. Harrison's voice from behind one of the masks, "what is your verdict?"

"I didn't see the stone," a querulous voice complained. "You don't get your money's worth if you don't see everything."

"That is a fair criticism. Any others?"

There was a mutter that might have signified anything.

"I'll call for a vote. Those in favor of admitting Brother Joaquin to the Society so signify."

Querulous thrust out a meager first with its thumb turned down.

Other votes were about equally divided.

"Brother Joaquin is admitted to membership, but on probation," Harrison ruled after a careful count. "He was guilty of gross clumsiness but that will be repaired by the Life Ray. Perhaps he may improve with practice."

"And now, Brothers," he continued after the first performer had been revived and led to an empty seat, "we have with us tonight a man whom all of you would recognize if he removed his hood. He plans a very delicate operation on the brain; one we never before have been privileged to witness. Ready, Brother Ambrose?"

Weinkopf stood up as Connie, wearing mask and cap, wheeled in the operating table with Mrs. Peyton's generous bulk under the sheet. He was amazed and pleased to find himself cool, collected and even slightly amused at the mumbo jumbo.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said as he removed the hood and flipped it into a corner. "I can't see properly through that damned pillow case. I must add," he went on after the surprised murmurs had died away, "that I do not intend to deliver any lecture while operating. I will devote all my attention to my patient."

"I protest," someone shouted from the back benches. "This is entirely irregular. Don't trust this character. He's a Medicop spy."

"Nothing of the kind," Harrison sounded lazily amused. "I vouch for Dr. Weinkopf. Proceed, sir."

"I am going to perform a sub-temporal with the object of open-

ing and curetting the pineal organ, or epiphysis," Weinkopf said quietly. "As you know, the pineal body is a small conical structure. It springs from the posterior part of the roof of the third ventricle and projects backward over the superior quadrigeminal bodies." He stammered to a halt as he noticed that, from the table, Mrs. Peyton was regarding him with the fascination of a suicidal bird for a snake.

"Some of the early twentieth century brain specialists thought that the epiphysis was a rudimentary third eye," he forced himself to go on. "They considered it a vestigial organ, like the vermiform appendix, which had lost whatever function it might once have had. I, on the other hand, after years of vivisection and careful study of the old, illegal texts, have convinced myself that the pineal organ is neither rudimentary nor vestigial. It is, instead, an amazingly accurate 90-year clock . . . the Clock of Life."

"Oh, come now, Weinie," someone jeered, "stop pulling our legs and start making with the cleaver."

"Order! Order!" Harrison shouted, angry for the first time that his friend could recall. "This is a scientific body, not a collection of butchers. Pray continue, doctor."

"I base my findings," Weinkopf went on tartly, "on the fact

that the epiphysis of every adult animal that I have trephined contains within its supporting tissue a number of small spherical bodies consisting of calcareous salts. On section, these bodies show a concentric laminated structure vaguely resembling the rings that one can see on the stump of a cut tree."

"Are these nice big stones, doctor?" Querulous interrupted avidly.

"I'm terribly sorry, doctor." Weinkopf stressed the last word. "They are microscopic."

"And what is your thesis?" Harrison cut in as the old man started to rise angrily from his bench.

"Just this: First, in senile animals this 'brain sand,' as it has been called, is found not only in the pineal organ but in the choroid plexuses, pia arachnoid and other parts of the brain . . ."

"Talk English, man," someone shouted impatiently. "We're not up on that jargon."

"Second, I never have been able to find a particle of such sand in the brain of any fish, no matter how old it may have been!" He paused while an excited murmur ran around the room. "Under the circumstances it seems a workable hypothesis that a critical concentration of brain sand, accumulated over the years, excites some neural or even physical complex which stops the heart. Remove

the sand by surgery or find a way of dissolving it in situ and human life may be prolonged indefinitely." He turned to the sink and began scrubbing his hands vigorously. "That is my thesis," he said over the sound of running water. "It may be an amateurish one, due to my lack of experience in practical surgery. Since your own experiments along the same line have failed, it seems, however, to be the only avenue of attack we have left . . . I am ready to proceed with the operation. It will be performed under a local anesthetic since the brain is insensitive to pain and the patient has expressed a desire to watch me work."

"Just a minute, Dr. Weinkopf," cried a hard voice.

He whirled, towel in hand, to find Mrs. Peyton sitting up, clutching the sheet around her to best advantage and swinging her trim ankles over the edge of the operating table.

"Just a minute," she repeated through set teeth. "Did I hear you say you might prolong my life indefinitely?"

"Why yes," he stammered, wondering what tack her giddy mind had flown off on. "The human body is much like a house, Mrs. Peyton. Keep it shingled, and painted, the foundation repaired, the furnace running, and there's no reason why it shouldn't

last indefinitely. None whatever."

"There's that word again," she almost yelled at him while every hood in the theatre focused on her. "What does it mean in my case? Five years? Ten years?"

"Madame," he said placatingly, "if my theory is correct, there is no reason why you shouldn't live another century, or perhaps several centuries if you avoid an instantaneously fatal accident."

"Another century!" Her voice dropped to a croaking whisper. "One hundred years. Almost forty thousand days. Endless multitudes of leaden-footed hours. To play bridge in. To go to the Riviera in and wonder why I went there. To wash my teeth in. To wait for the 'phone to ring in but it never does so that I have to call up someone who detests me and make both of our lives miserable in. No!"

She was on her feet now, regal and Roman in the trailing sheet.

"No!" she repeated. "I was brought here on false pretences, to be operated on for a brain tumor. I didn't bargain for immortality. A few more years of life, yes. There are several thrills I haven't enjoyed. But I'll be no Mrs. Methuselah to please you bloodthirsty old dogs. Nurse! My clothes, if you please!"

She paced out, as if to slow music, savoring to the core of her being the roar of astonishment and delight that went up.

Harrison banged with a gavel until some sort of order was restored.

"Brothers," he said at last. "You know the rules. A neophyte who fails to operate forfeits his rights to life. That is the only way we can protect ourselves from imposters. It is for you to decide whether Weinkopf is to be euthed, the supreme penalty, or is to be operated on here and now by one of us."

The condemned man stared at the speaker with horrified amusement. Wasn't Harrison going to admit his own fault; tell the others that he had foisted Mrs. Peyton on them? But of course he wasn't! Instead he was calmly counting upraised and downward-thrusting thumbs.

"The vote is unanimously in favor of an operation on the neophyte," Harrison chortled. "The patient is granted only one boon. He may select any one of us he pleases to perform the operation and name any operation . . . any major operation, that he prefers."

"Take me. Take me," Querulous was shrieking. "I'll yank your gall bladder out slick as a whistle. 'Take me.'

"Pay no attention to that old coot," shouted the man behind him. "Take me. I've performed five . . ."

"Take me. Take me." Hands were waving on all sides. A few

of the Brothers were jumping up and down like children. Weinkopf, revolted to the core, stood rooted in the midst of an excellent facsimile of the original Bedlam when Connie Lara, freed of Mrs. Peyton, returned to the theater.

"What is your choice, Weinkopf?" asked the inquisitor when his gavel had prevailed. "In case you are thinking of escape, let me assure you that this place is well guarded."

"The operation shall be the one previously scheduled," Karl answered. "Since I wouldn't trust any of you to bone a chicken, I choose this nurse to trephine me at my direction under local anesthesia."

"So be it." Harrison shouted the mob down. "Our Sister is competent. And Dr. Weinkopf deserves our respect. I will show that respect by acting as his interne." He stepped down from his seat. "Instruct me, doctor, on the arrangement of your equipment."

Half an hour later Weinkopf lay on the operating table under the shadowless lights. He wore the regulation white gown. The right side of his head had been shaved. Harrison was making last-minute adjustments on the clamps that held his limbs rigid and on the mirrors that would allow him to see every detail of the operation.

"Good luck, Connie," he said to the girl who stood over him.



"You'll do all right. Even if you fail, it won't matter. You or someone else can try again until you hit the jackpot . . . if there is one. Give me the local now."

The needle bit his scalp. Numbness followed it like a slow wave.

"Cut a large flap of skin and lay it back," he directed when anesthesia was complete.

She did the job neatly. He felt only a slight tickling. There was little bleeding.

"Split the fibres of the temporal muscle and clamp them back."

"You've had plenty of experience" he said as he watched her flying fingers.

"A long, long time ago, doctor. Don't compliment me yet."

"Now use the ring saw."

All hell broke loose as the power tool attacked his skull. There was no pain; only a cacophony of horrid sound.

"Perfect," he grimaced as the section loosened. "Separate the bone from the dura mater membrane covering the brain. Careful!

Don't tear it. Cut it clean and lay it back. Eeeeasy . . . So that's how my grey matter looks. Use the nibbling forceps now. . . . Brrrrrr!"

"Should the brain bulge so much?"

"Certainly. The pressure is rather high. It will go back when you replace the osteo-plastic flap . . . Can you locate the pineal gland? That's it, right there beside the corpora quadrigemina."

"And now, doctor?" He noted that violet smudges had developed under her eyes.

"Now you're on your own. Use the scalpel to cut through the blood vessels to the supporting tissue. Don't worry if there is a little bleeding.

"Good. Use the staff to divide the tissue. No, not that one! The staff to the right. That's it.

"Probe for bits of brain sand. Take your time . . . There's one! Got it!

"Deeper. Deeper. There should be a lot of it at my age. Don't be

afraid of hurting me. You can't. I'm as tough as Chimpo . . . He stood it . . . Hey! "What's the matter with those confounded lights?"

"Why, nothing, doctor." She stared at him, stark terror in those eyes.

"I thought they flickered. Go on. Go on! Keep probing! We'll lose our audience." He essayed a chuckle. "Damn those lights. I tell you . . ." His voice changed to a croak. "Adrenalin! Oxygen! Qui. . . ."

The lights were out now and he no longer could feel the hard mattress of the operating table. He was rolling . . . rolling slowly like a mill wheel down a black and echoing tunnel. Oxygen starvation? Heart block? Or had Connie just poked too deeply into the Life Clock and set its broken gears and wheels whirring madly? He had been so intent he hadn't seen it coming. Fool!

He rolled on, trying at first to judge time by heartbeats that didn't come, then coolly considering other matters. They would be working like mad, Harrison and Connie, up there in the operating room, to bring him round. Where had he made his mistake? Was a subtemporal the wrong approach, even if it had worked on his animals? Should he have attacked through a frontal flap or through the nose after removal of the

cartilage and bone in the nasal septum? Too late now. Too late . . .

He shook himself mentally and was amazed as the wheel that he had become wobbled and scraped against the side of the corridor, emitting sparks. Here was a hallucination to end them all! For just a second the lights came back on, blinding him as he sucked oxygen deep into his lungs. That was better! He'd outlive all of those sadistic old dogs with their lolling red tongues; outlive them by hundreds of years in a brave new world . . . God! How dark could it get?

Far down at the end of the tunnel a blue light was flashing, now, like a beacon. He approached it at increasing speed. Down. Down. How many miles? They had better hurry. Although it didn't really matter too much, he admitted. Connie? Yes, he would have liked to solve that sweet mystery. She was the only one of the whole lot worth spitting at. But she would carry on without him; She wouldn't quit. Not until the gift of something resembling immortality was presented to a race that might never prove worthy of it . . . that never could prove worthy of it with a life span of a paltry 90 years.

Not bad, that thought!

His last?

He pondered the matter as the wheel rolled on toward the light.

THE MAN WITH COMMON SENSE

EDWIN JAMES

Illustrated By ROBERT KEYS

Although better known for incisive science-fiction novels like The Joy Makers (1961) and The Immortals (1962), from time to time James Gunn—writing as Edwin James—likes to loosen up with a few shorts about a dapper little character named Malachi Jones, agent for LAIRDS OF LUNA ("We insure anything"), who on one occasion was called upon to guarantee the survival of an entire race of mutants. In an earlier adventure, however—this one—Jones faced an even knottier problem: how to keep the peace (insured by his company) on a planet just about ripe for a bloody rebellion!



THE saloon was raffishly romantic—a crazy quilt of crude makeshifts and glitteringly improbably extravagance. Above, a ceiling of frosted glass glowed with shifting multi-colored flames, lending a rapid succession of expressions to the rough, blackened, stubbled faces of the boisterous crowd. Beneath their heavy, impatient feet the sand scuffled into little heaps and drifts on the pitted concrete floor.

The weathered sign outside read: Dirty John's Palace of Pleasure and Grill. And beneath that: The best blasted Sar steak on Mizar II. With one notable exception, however, the throng within was bent more on other pleasures than the culinary, and the waiters bobbed and weaved swiftly with laden trays of raw, throat-stinging liquor.

Dirty John solicitously bent low over his best table and inquired of the one incongruous note in the explosively turbulent room if the Sar steak was done to satisfaction.

The dapper, wizened little man with the thin graying hair raised his gaze from the hewn boards of the table that came up almost to his chest and, chewing with the slow meditation of the connoisseur, nodded reflectively.

A preposterously self-satisfied expression spread over Dirty John's smashed roughneck features. His huge scarred hands fluttered.

The Man With The Common Sense, copyright 1950 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co.

THE MAN WITH COMMON SENSE

"The minute you come in I tells myself that there's a man who knows what he's eating, and when you ask for the charcoal grill instead of the radiation I knew for sure. Give these space bums and sod busters a few drinks"—he swept his arm in a wide disdainful arc around the room—"and they'll eat swill a Venusian swamp dog would turn up his nose at."

"Common sense," said the little man soberly, dabbing at a minute spot of grease on his conservative business suit that fought a losing battle with the universal time-blackened space leathers and mud-spattered overalls, "common sense says that the best cook is the fattest cook."

All three hundred pounds of Dirty John's massive bulk shook with laughter.

"Common sense," he roared. "By all the perils of space, that's what this misbegotten planet needs—common sense!"

"And good food," the middle-aged little fellow said before he began to chew on another dripping chunk of "the best blasted Sar steak".

Dirty John's face darkened abruptly. He gave the table a vicious swipe with the filthy rag in his hand.

"Yeah," he said.

There was no answer to that, and the little man made none. It was just as well, for the lights from overhead slowly began to

cease their restless play, and a relative darkness settled over all of Dirty John's establishment except a small area cleared at the end farthest from the door. There, the stained lights began to play a swirl of color that kept eerie time to a steady throb of sensual music.

The room was almost silent for a moment before a hundred booted feet took up the beat and reinforced it to a compelling rhythm. Almost as if against its will, a weaving, sinuous figure was drawn into the fringes of the changing lights. Like a bird around a snake, it revolved in slowly decreasing spirals until, at the moment of entering the center of the area, the figure froze, feet together, arms thrown back, face lifted with closed eyes toward the source of the eddying spectrum.

The little man in the booth looked up from his meal to gaze on the spectacle. The figure was a woman, slim but well-rounded in the proper places as approved by current fashion, clothed just enough to enhance and not enough to conceal. The sudden silence was evidence of the audiences' sincere admiration.

At that moment the outside door was flung open and a tall, lean, broadshouldered young man swayed in the opening. His eyes dazedly took in the picture of the room without comprehension.

"Help!" he said hoarsely. "She's been kidnapped!"

A few shaggy heads swiveled momentarily in his direction. A few hands made threatening gestures. The young man staggered on into the room.

"Help . . ." he began again.

A few throats made menacing rumbling noises, and the crook of a cane deftly caught him by a trouser loop and pulled him to a thumping sitting position in a booth.

"Common sense," said a low, quiet voice beside him, "says that anyone who gets between hungry men and their food is likely to be eaten. Have a bite?"

The little man pointed at the remnants of the Sar steak. The newcomer's eyes slowly focused on the meat, now lit by flickering shadows of purple and ocher. He shuddered and shook his head.

The other shrugged and speared a livid piece.

"Food," he said, "is one of the few pleasures that lasts a lifetime."

The young man gradually became aware of his neighbor, and his gaze flickered in amazement from the soft-leather shoes dangling over the side of the bench to the cane and old-fashioned derby hat resting beside him and finally to the lean, incisive face with the innocent blue eyes.

"Who in the galaxy," he said blankly, "are you?"

Silently the little man extracted a leather case from his pocket, removed a card and laid it on the table. The young man peered at it until a brighter reflection lit it up. It read:

LAIRDS OF LUNA

"We insure anything"

Malachi Jones

The young man stared at the card with a puzzled expression on his face.

"What . . . !?" he began in a loud voice.

"Sh-h-h," Malachi said, as a number of faces turned angrily in their direction.

He pointed in the direction of the dance. The music had risen to a peak of emotion and the dancer was beginning to shiver as if with excitement. Slowly driven by the insistent rhythm, she moved from her rigid pose, then faster and faster until she abandoned herself to the seducing beat.

The dance and music were frankly sensual, appealing to each woman-starved man there according to his own desires. The emotion was pervasive, and the tense excitement of the room rose steadily in a palpable wave.

The young man gazed for a moment at the sense-entralling sight of the woman's lithely-moving figure caressed and transformed by flickering fingers of light, and he buried his face in

his hands, sobbing loudly.
"Horrible! Horrible!"

No one was annoyed this time; no one had any sight or hearing left for anything except what was happening before him.

"The sexual element," Malachi said judiciously, "has been found to be the basis for all art forms."

Malachi looked at the back of the young man's head. A lump the size of an egg was swelling behind his right ear.

"You were saying something about a girl when you came in?" he asked politely.

The young man looked up with bloodshot eyes.

"She's gone," he said brokenly. "The rebels got her—not far from here. She asked me to escort her from the ship. She's gone. And I'm here in this—place—when I should be trying to rescue her!"

"My dear boy," Malachi said mildly, "all adventures start in low dives like this. Adventure fiction has made it obligatory. But who is the young woman?"

The other's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"How do I know you aren't one of them?"

Malachi pointed at the card.

"I'm an agent for Lairds of Luna, 'We insure anything,'" he said. "What is more, I just arrived on Mizar II on the same ship as yourself—and the young woman, too, I imagine. She is, I presume, an employee of the Bureau of Extra-Solar Affairs?"

"How did you know?" the other blurted out.

"Common sense," said Malachi, "says that a young woman arriving on Mizar II is either a prospective settler's wife or a government agent. Your interest in the young woman disposes of the former possibility."

The young man broke down.

"You're right," he said. "And I'm Rand Ridgeway, second mate of the *Quest*. And now I've made a mess of things, and if the Bureau ever finds out that one of their agents has been touched there'll be war for sure."

"Hm-m-m," Malachi mused as he finished the last of his steak.

Rand started to get up impatiently, but Malachi carelessly reached up with his cane and pulled him back down, gesturing toward the entertainment. It was reaching a climax, the dancer beaded with perspiration and beginning to slow her movements in time with the music. Every languid motion seemed to suggest that she was on the verge of surrender to passion. The pulsing emotions of a hundred men rose to a frenzy.

Somewhere in front a huge, barrel-chested man rose to his feet and bellowed like a bull. He started blindly forward toward the cleared space and the music stopped, the dancer cowering back, panting from her exertions.

Someone—it may have been a waiter—tripped the man, and he

sprawled on his face in the sand. When he got up, Dirty John, moving swiftly for a man of his size, put a fist in his face. A mutter arose from the crowd, and the heightened emotions that had been passion turned to something else. A scuffle started near the door, and men turned to stare at it.

"Common sense," Malachi said cheerfully, "says that when a woman is shared by a hundred men she can belong to none of them. Also, I see that our exit is obstructed.

"Here," he said, handing Rand the heavy plate on which the Sar steak had rested, "see how far you can throw it."

Rand looked at him without understanding for a moment, then turned, shrugged, and heaved it far down the room. It shattered against the hard head of a burly rocketeer, and he roared with pain and anger. Turning quickly, he struck the man behind him who staggered back, knocking over tables and men like dominoes. Soon there was a knot of flailing arms. The fight spread like panic.

Malachi got slowly up, settled his derby on his head at a rakish angle, draped his cane over his arm, and left the booth. Rand stared after him for a moment, irresolutely, then back at the clot ted mob and the terrified dancer beyond. He plunged into the melee.

When Rand finally crawled from the shattered building, his space leathers in tatters, his body and face cut and matted with blood and sand, he found Malachi waiting, dapper and debonair, comfortably propped on his cane.

"Where were you?" Rand groaned reproachfully.

Common sense," Malachi said lightly, "says that the best place in a fight is outside."

Rand groaned, shook his head, and staggered to his feet.

"What in the galaxy are you doing here anyway?"

"Representing my company, Lairds of Luna, 'We insure anything,'" Malachi said, as if that explained everything. "Surely you've heard of Lairds."

"Of course," Rand said, groaning. "You may sell a lot of insurance, too, but you'll never get rich on Mizar II. The death rate is higher here than it is in space service, from fights and accidents in trying to make Mizar II a possibly place to live."

"Oh, I'm not a salesman," Malachi said. "I'm an agent who sees that our customers get good value for their money. And a month ago one of them took out a policy insuring the peace of Mizar II."

"In that case Lairds had better be prepared to pay through the nose," Rand said gloomily. "The settlers and workers here are going to revolt in a week. I just hope the *Quest* clears before it breaks out. If we can find San-

dra—Miss Johnson—quickly . . .

"I know," Malachi said. "But Lairds always gives value for its money. If an insurer is sick, Lairds provides the best doctor. Mr. Gordon Brown paid for peace, and Lairds is going to see that he gets it."

Rand looked up in surprise at the name—a movement that made him wince with pain.

"But he's one of the rebel leaders!"

Malachi didn't seem surprised. A man reeled out of the saloon between them, holding his head gingerly as if he were afraid of losing it.

"Perhaps we should find a more secluded place to talk," Malachi said. "If we are going to preserve peace, we must make plans."

A small moon was shedding an indifferent light on the crude space port and the cruder buildings surrounding it. Not far down the rutted trail that led to the nearest village, Malachi and Rand drew themselves into the scraggly, omnipresent brush. Malachi removed his derby, brushed it with the sleeve of his coat, and placed it carefully on the ground beside him. Rand settled himself with a muffled groan.

"As I understand it," Malachi began, "the settlers are unsatisfied with the way the Bureau has been treating them."

"You know how it is," said Rand. "A lot of promises were

made to get them out here—ten years ago, some of them—and they find it's hard work, not enough supplies, and few women. I suppose people back home forget and get tired of sending supplies and machinery for no observable results."

"Common sense," mused Malachi, "says that revolution is useless when it cannot gain the fruits of victory."

"Eh?" said Rand. "What do you mean by that?"

"When a colony is still dependent on the home planet, revolution is worse than futile, it is stupid."

"That may be true," Rand said, "but what are the poor fellows going to do? To tell you the truth, I don't really care, anyway. If Sandra weren't in their hands, I'd be on the ship by now—sleeping or eating. I wish you had brought along some of that steak."

"I did," Malachi said, drawing a large package out of his right pocket. "When I told Dirty John I was planning on taking a walk, he insisted on fixing me a lunch. A very obliging fellow, really. And the best cook this side of Canopus." Malachi sighed. "That steak was a masterpiece."

"Never mind the advertising," Rand said. "Give me the food."

Rand tore at the wrappings and groaning with mingled pain and hunger, started to gnaw a huge hunk off the steak within. As

suddenly he stopped, his teeth just about to bite into the tender, juicy meat.

"What am I doing?" he said bitterly. "How can I think of food when Sandra is imprisoned somewhere, straving, probably!"

"Even heroes and lovers must eat," Malachi said. "A point often overlooked by authors."

Rand scrambled after the steak, brushed it off carefully, and bit into it quickly, before any compunctions might again strike him.

"You're right," he said.

Malachi watched him with gentle eyes.

"Wait till the boys at the office hear about me eating Sar steak," he said. "By the way, what is a Sar?"

"It's a large carnivore native to Mizar II," Rand said carelessly.

Malachi jumped up hastily and peered nervously into the brush.

"You needn't worry," Rand said. "They seldom attack men."

"Common sense," said Malachi with a quaver in his voice which he suppressed with difficulty, "says that a man who enjoys food as much as I do can appreciate best the emotions of a carnivore."

"The important thing," Rand said, waving a slab of meat in the air, "is what are we going to do about our mutual problems. How are we going to find Sandra and release her?"

Malachi slowly resumed his seat and settling his chin in

his palm meditated silently.

"That, as you say," he said at last, "is the problem."

They thought about it for a while, Rand chewing noisily on the product of Dirty John's proud cuisine.

Finally Malachi broke the silence.

"The first thing to do," he said, "is to find the headquarters of the rebels and—or the place Miss Johnson is being held prisoner."

"Fat chance," said Rand. "We might as well go back to the ship for reinforcements."

"No," said Malachi with determination. "If we let any more people know about it, war will be a certainty. The Bureau could never let Miss Johnson's abduction pass by if it became public knowledge. Besides, I have reinforcements."

He pulled a large flask from his left pocket.

"Another of Dirty John's gifts."

The flask passed back and forth several times before anything more was said.

"Sh-h-h," Malachi said, "Do you hear anything?"

"Only your voice," Rand said.

"Sh-h-h," Malachi cautioned again.

Finally the sound was plain. A number of men were walking along the road, quietly.

"Who," Malachi whispered, "could be walking so soberly

along this road at this time of night?"

Rand shrugged and then looked up.

"Rebels," he said. "Going to a meeting."

Malachi nodded.

"In stories," Rand said eagerly, "they always waylay one of them and force the information out of him."

Malachi shook his head and enumerated his objections briefly in a low tone: "Take too long—too much noise—unethical."

"What a time to worry about ethics," Rand said.

Malachi raised a finger. He got up, carefully brushed himself off, picked up his derby and placed it on his head, picked up his cane and hung it over his arm, and motioned Rand to join him. He beckoned Rand's ear close to his lips.

"Common sense," he whispered, "says that when you don't know where you're going and you don't want to ask, the best thing to do is to follow someone who's going there."

And they did.

How long is this thing going to continue?" Rand whispered groaning softly.

They had been following the steady tread of feet for almost an hour.

"Sh-h-h," shushed Malachi. "Do you want to bring the lot of them down on us?"

"My feet hurt," Rand com-

plained. "They never have to worry about things like that in stories."

Malachi handed him the flask.

"They say alcohol is good for injuries," Rand said complacently, tilting the container.

"That's on the outside," Malachi said bitterly. "If I had known you were going to use them as an excuse all night, I wouldn't have left Dirty John's so soon. You've had three drinks to my one."

They tramped on through the night until Malachi stopped abruptly, silenced Rand, and cocked his head to one side.

"Do you hear anything?" he said finally.

"No," Rand said.

"I don't either," Malachi said. "There's nobody ahead of us any more."

"Good," Rand said, sat down at the edge of the road, removed his left shoe, and dumped a large rock and several pounds of sand out of it.

"They must have turned off somewhere," Malachi said thoughtfully.

Somewhere nearby a loud roar split the night.

"What's that?" Malachi said nervously.

"A Sar," Rand said. He had now removed his right shoe.

Malachi cleared his throat. "Let us," he said eagerly, "—let us retrace our steps."

They had walked several hun-

dred yards when Rand gave an exclamation of pain.

"What's the matter?" Malachi asked in a startled tone.

"The rocks hurt my feet," Rand said. "I forgot my shoes."

Malachi sighed. "Go back and see if you can find them."

There was a silence of about fifteen minutes broken by the repeated roar of the Sar, nearer this time.

"Rand!" Malachi whispered vigorously.

"Yes!" came the distant, exasperated reply. "I can't find my shoes!"

"Come on without them," Malachi urged. "We can't waste all night."

Groans and expletives marked Rand's progress down the road.

"Heroism," he moaned when he reached Malachi, "is not what it's cracked up to be."

"A much overrated occupation," Malachi agreed. "There must be a side trail here that we missed. You cover that side of the road, and I'll look on this side."

They searched for about a quarter of a mile in that fashion, Malachi with his cane thrust aggressively among the bushes at the side of the road, Rand moaning pitifully. Suddenly there was no more brush to slow Malachi's cane.

"Rand," he whispered, "there's some kind of path here."

Rand joined him and peered off

into the obscuring darkness.

"It looks like there's a light down that way," he agreed.

After consultation they agreed to follow the new trail. They had progressed no farther than a few feet, however, when Rand cried out and sat down heavily grabbing his foot.

"There's a trap there," he said in agony. "They must have set some knives in the path, probably poisoned. Go on, Malachi. Skirt the trap and leave me here. Rescue Sandra and save peace. All I ask is that you tell her—I loved her."

Malachi, meanwhile, had been investigating Rand's stockinginged foot. His fingers gave a quick jerk. Rand winced and stifled a groan.

"Here," Malachi said, dropping an object in his palm, "here is your poisoned knife."

"It's a thorn," Rand said with disbelief.

"Common sense," Malachi said sadly, "says that a hero without shoes is worse than a hero without brains. Get up and let's get on with our business."

They walked quietly a few hundred yards along the trail without further incident. Then Rand stopped short and clutched Malachi's arm.

"What about guards?" he whispered. "They're sure to have guards."

"Why?" Malachi asked in amazement. "Who on Mizar II do

they have to guard against?"

"Well," Rand said reluctantly, "it was a thought."

"They might have someone at the door to keep out anyone who isn't invited," Malachi conceded. "Maybe we should take to the brush and reconnoiter. That light doesn't look far away."

They made their way off the path, Rand stepping gingerly, and then turned once more toward the light which seemed to be coming from an unguarded window. When they had advanced fifty feet, Rand walked into a wall. It was a substantial wall of native rock, and Rand cursed vigorously but silently for ten minutes, rubbing his knee and forehead.

"This is a nice wall," Malachi whispered. "I can just reach the top with my cane. There seems to be some sort of sharp material stuck in the top."

"Here," Rand said. "Put your foot in my hand and I'll hoist you up."

Malachi turned an amazed gaze on him.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"How else are we going to get in?" Rand asked with exasperation. "What are you going to do, go to the front door, knock, and say you're from Lairds of Luna and wouldn't they like to insure something?"

"Certainly," Malachi said. "Common sense says that the

best way to get into a house is through the front door."

"Maybe you're crazy," Rand said, "but I'm not."

He began to tear strips from his already tattered space leathers and fashion them into crude bandages for his hands. Even in the dimness of the waning moon he presented a horrible appearance—his black and bleeding feet poked through the shreds of his socks, his trousers fringed to his knees, his jacket now gone to make bandages exposing his bruised and battered chest, his face puffed, cut and scraped into a parody of humanity.

But determination was in Rand Ridgeway's every action, and his heart was light.

"Wish me luck," he said gaily at last.

"Luck," Malachi said laconically.

Rand sprang up, grabbed the top of the wall, and slowly levered himself up. With many exclamations of pain he maneuvered his body over the glass-studded top and dropped heavily to the ground below.

Malachi Jones brushed a patch of dust from his otherwise impeccable garments, adjusted the angle of his derby and, whistling softly, walked casually around to the front door.

Malachi's firm cane-blows on the front door echoed through the night. When the door was finally flung open, a huge, stubble-faced

brute with a surly expression stood belligerently in the doorway.

"Who in this misbegotten galaxy," he said, "are you?"

Formally Malachi extended a card.

"Malachi Jones," he said cheerfully. "Agent for Lairds of Luna, 'We insure anything.'"

While the man was staring at the card in amazement, Malachi brushed past him into the room.

"Where," he said casually, "is the meeting?"

"Up those stairs . . ." the man began in bewilderment, then, "Where do you think you're going!"

He drew Malachi back by his coat collar and lifted him into the air like a terrier with a rat. His ugly, bloodshot eyes stared into Malachi's indignant blue ones.

"I have business," Malachi said with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Business, business," the brute snarled, shaking Malachi back and forth until his derby fell off and rolled on the floor. "Any business you have is outside."

He motioned as if he were going to throw Malachi through the doorway.

Malachi's cane thwacked solidly against the side of his skull. Malachi picked himself up, straightened his coat, rescued his derby tenderly and inspected it for damage, and stepped over the body blocking the stairs.

At the top of the steps he paused momentarily while he located the door from which came a mingled babble of voices. He walked carefully down the hall, listened at the door for a second, opened it, and stepped inside.

"What was it, Pete?" someone said, as Malachi stood blinking in the sudden light.

Then came an outburst of curses including questions of identity and parentage and directions for getting rid of the intruder. As Malachi's vision returned he saw a group of rough, angry men surrounding a large table. One of the men was starting toward him.

"Damp your jets," someone said. "I know the little guy."

Malachi located the owner of the voice. It was all three hundred pounds of Dirty John.

"Let him talk," said Dirty John. "And if anybody lays a hand on him I'll serve the misbegotten sinner for dinner tomorrow!"

"Gentlemen," said Malachi, stepping forward, "I am here representing my company, Lairds of Luna, which has, as it were, an interest in the matter under discussion here."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Lairds wishes to preserve peace on Mizar II if at all possible," Malachi said soberly.

"Well, ain't that nice of them," someone said sarcastically.

Malachi turned in the direction

of the last comment and nodded.

"I assure you, sir," he said, "It may be a matter of life and death with you, but to Lairds it is a matter of dollars and cents."

The same person, a large, florid man, turned to the others angrily.

"Who cares about Lairds?" he said "Nobody's going to help us but ourselves."

"Both statements are false," Malachi said quietly. "You are, I presume, Mr. Gordon Brown?"

The startled expression on the man's face was proof that the guess had been accurate. Malachi turned to the others.

"Mr. Brown cares enough about Lairds that he insured the peace of Mizar II with my company and stands to gain ten million dollars if revolt breaks out. As for the second statement, Lairds of Luna is prepared to offer any assistance in its power to aid in your predicament."

There was silence in the room. Several of the men turned to stare at Brown with cold eyes. Finally Dirty John cleared his throat.

"It don't cost to listen," he said. "What's the offer?"

A smile spread across Malachi's face.

"Gentlemen," he said, "common sense says that men willing to listen to reason seldom fail to find a reasonable solution . . ."

Fifteen minutes later an even more battered, ragged, and bedraggled Rand Ridgeway was

dragged through the door. Both his eyes were almost swollen shut, the angle of his nose seemed to be altered, and he had difficulty moving his jaw.

"We found this tramp roaming around inside the wall," one of the men escorting him said.

"He's with me," Malachi said apologetically. "He has romantic delusions."

Rand was released and he slumped into a heap against the wall beside the heap that was, while conscious, insurer Gordon Brown. When Rand once more became aware of his surroundings, Malachi was making what seemed to be the final remarks in an argument.

"But how do we know Lairds can do us any good," Dirty John objected.

"Gentlemen," Malachi chided, "the reputation of Lairds of Luna speaks for itself." His eyes got a fond, reminiscent look. "Once, I remember, Lairds preserved an empire by insuring the birth of an heir."

"But it's so—so—"

"Simple?" Malachi supplied. "Of course. All problems have a simple solution. Common sense says that the simplest answer is the best answer."

Dirty John looked around him at the undecided faces.

"I dunno—" he began, when Malachi approached him and whispered in his ear. A look of amazement and consternation

spread over his face. He glanced nervously at the other members of the group while Malachi made his way back to the spot where Rand was just struggling to his feet.

"Maybe you're right," Dirty John said hastily.

"What did you tell him?" Rand asked in a low voice, moving his jaw stiffly.

"That I would reveal the fact that the dancer was his wife," Malachi whispered back.

"How did you know that?" Rand asked in amazement.

"I didn't," Malachi replied, "but common sense says . . ."

"All right, all right," Rand said. "I'll take your word for it."

Gradually, reluctantly, the men began to agree.

"Might as well give it a try," one said; and another, "What can we lose?"

Malachi seized upon the moment, advanced to the table, and drew out a paper and a pen.

"If you gentlemen will sign this document everything will be in proper order."

One by one they affixed their signatures. One by one Malachi shook their hands and complimented them upon a wise decision. He then picked up the paper, placed it carefully in his pocket, took his hat and cane, and walked toward the door.

"But, Malachi!" Rand said plaintively. "What about Sandra?"

"Oh, yes," Malachi said, turning. "I believe you have a young woman somewhere around—a Miss Johnson. I think it would be wise to let her go."

The erstwhile rebels glanced irresolutely at one another.

"The little fellow's right," said Dirty John.

When Sandra was brought into the room, she fled into Rand's arms, made many cooing sounds of sympathy over his battered condition, and undertook to cure each cut with her lips. Rand, however, thought they might be used for better purposes and closed them effectively with his own.

"Romance," Malachi said drily, "apparently has its own peculiar compensations. But on the other hand he doesn't know the true value of food. By the way, Dirty John, I don't suppose I could induce you to come back to Luna with me as a cook?"

Dirty John shook his head and then looked up happily.

"I can give you that recipe for Sar steak," he said. "And I'll even throw in a frozen Sar."

Malachi licked his lips. "Good," he said.

He turned once more toward the door, guiding the two young people ahead of him. He stirred the heap against the wall with one small, dainty foot.

"You might send this thing back to the port," he said. "I think Lairds will sue for attempted fraud."

Once they were outside, Rand turned to Malachi bewilderedly.

"How did you get them to agree?"

"Simple my boy," Malachi said, tilting his derby to a jaunty angle and giving his cane a twirl. "I simply guaranteed that Mizar II would procure sufficient supplies. Common sense says that when the cause of revolution is the fear of being cut off from the supplies of home, the answer which makes peace is to insure the supplies' arrival."

"Oh," Rand said, and turned his attention to another product of the night's adventure.

"Common sense says . . ." Malachi began again . . .

But, like many wise words, these went unheard.

The End

BRYCE WALTON'S NEW NOVELETTE
THE ULTIMATE GIFT

IN THE Jan FANTASTIC

The galaxy was almost equally divided between two great spheres of influence—the Bears and the Centaurs—with Old Earth aging somewhere in between. None of which particularly mattered to fiercely independent Ray Mallin (Martian by birth, space engineer by choice)—that is, not until enemy agents from all three sectors became so interested in him that they thought nothing of using a nerve-whip set for maximum or of leaving him for dead in the street. Nor would they hesitate—as he soon found out—to turn off the air-supply of a baby whose potential I.Q. could top 2000!

BORN UNDER MARS

JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

(Second of Two Parts)

Synopsis of Part One

When spaceman RAY MALLIN (Martian, seven feet four inches tall, every one of them filled with bitterness over the declining status of his homeworld) is stranded on a Centaur planet called Durirth, he eagerly agrees to sign on as four-space engineer aboard the Hippodamia, a sleek but powerful ladyboat skippered by CAPTAIN LUGATH, a Centaur officer who asks few questions and, in turn, offers few answers all the way back to Mars. Shortly after his return, however, while wandering through an old quarter of the canal-floor city of Zond, Mallin is waylaid by four men wearing privacy screens, one of whom insists

that Mallin knows some secret connected with the Hippodamia and uses a nerve-whip to emphasize his point. But since Mallin really doesn't know anything about what these men are after, they finally give up, stun him unconscious and leave him dying in the street, his oxygen mask malfunctioning in the thin Martian atmosphere.

However, he is rescued by PETER NIZAM and LILITH CHOY, two strangers from Earth, now an Old System planet strategically located between the Bears and the Centaurs, the two great power-blocs facing each other across the galaxy. The two Earth people also want to know what happened aboard the Hippodamia, and when the irritated Mallin insists that he's as much in the dark as they are, they are openly skeptical. Nizam

then takes advantage of the strict Martian code of honor, which requires that Mallin acknowledge obligation to anyone saving his life. Though reluctant, the spaceman agrees to see if he can pick up any information from other crewmen who might also have been aboard the Hippodamia.

Irritated by his obligation to the two Earth people and determined to avenge himself on the unknown four, Mallin decides to seek the help of his former teacher, THODER, but the old man no longer lives at his last address, which is now the site of the Martian College of Heralds, whose proprietor calls herself ZOND KING OF ARMS. Fortunately, her assistant, YUMA, knows Thoder's new address. He also tells the spaceman that a MAJOR HOUSK, a Centaur officer, has been making inquiries about the Mallin strain. (Mallin instantly associates him with the four who nerve-whipped him the day before.)

Though near exhaustion with the after-effects of nerve-whipping. Mallin decides to see Thodor immediately. Typically, the old man greets him just as warmly as if years hadn't intervened since their last meeting. He begins to help his former pupil sort out some of the details of the mystery in which he has become embroiled. Gradually, however, Mallin senses that the old man is trying to get rid of him. Confronted with this charge, Thoder admits that he is expecting someone, and at that moment the visitor—Captain Lugath!—arrives. The shock is too much for the bone-weary spaceman, and he blacks out at this point.

When he comes to, Mallin is in his own bedroom near the spaceport, but so befuddled that he can't remember anything at all about what happened in the past day or so, though he does sense something vaguely ominous looming beyond his scattered memories. Putting away such thoughts, he checks his

mail. Only one letter—from his father, half-heartedly inviting him to drop in next time he's passing through Pegasus. He is interred by GUS QUAISON, manager of the apartment block, who says a Centaur officer, a Major H had been asking for him that same morning. Though Mallin can't imagine what a Centaur would want with him, this new detail—combined with other tantalizing fragments of memory—sends him, for no apparent reason, to the Old Temple, now a local tourist attraction but once an awesome shrine to a boy growing up on Mars. But the general air of neglect and decay soon depresses him, so he starts to leave.

On the way out, however, he stumbles upon a secret door that opens out into an underground passage leading from the museum, and staring at him from the concealed inner room is an amazed Centaur in uniform, who instantly snatches up a nerve-whip and tries to use it on Mallin. But in a sudden stab of insight, Mallin recognizes who this must be—Major Housk!—and in an equally sudden flood of recollection he is instantly up to date on all that he had forgotten. Quickly, with his enormous Martian reach, he easily disarms his opponent, turns the whip on him, but fails to get anything really significant out of the cringing Centaur, who apparently follows orders blindly and knows little about the mystery surrounding the Hippodamia.

Then, after setting the whip for maximum and stunning the Major unconscious, Mallin—once more in command of himself, though still far from the heart of the mystery—decides to find out more about Lilith Choy and Peter Nizam. After that, he will look up old Thoder once again, but this time not as a kind of prodigal son, a lamb returning to the teacher's fold. No, not by a million light-years!

I went direct to the mainsurface entrance of Peter and Lilith's penthouse. I considered myself bound to come back to see them anyway—I was still obligated by the charge Peter had laid on me to relay any gossip I might pick up about the *Hippodamia*—but after learning what I had from Housk it seemed to me I had no one else to turn to. Originally my chief intention had been to settle accounts with whoever had kidnapped and nerve-whipped me. That idea had blown away like dust on the wind. If Housk had been acting on orders from "home," that meant this was an affair in which the Centaur government was involved through at least some of its agencies and it would be stupid to put my head down and batter forward on the path I'd first chosen. I needed to know exactly what I'd wandered into.

I hesitated before rapping on the door of the penthouse. I should have thought to make a comweb call first; they might not be in, and I'd have wasted my journey. But I'd been raised under the shadow of the traditional Martian assumption that comwebs were for emergencies—there had never been a full-scale private web established here. Thoder had just acquired a comweb code when I left him to make my first spacetrip. Prior to that,



he'd managed without. I'd never had a code of my own, relying on the shared code of the apartment block where I lived. It didn't seem worth the expense when I was so seldom at home.

Well, here I was. I might as well stop thinking of unrealized possibilities and rap on the door. In a sense that was another primitive habit, of course. How many things common to virtually all other inhabited worlds were lacking on Mars! Where else had I ever been where people actually knocked on doors instead of announcing themselves to a door-scanner?

I was beginning to carp continually at the way Mars seemed to have been bypassed: shortage of comwebs, lack of door-scanners, neglect of sidewalk glass, no maintenance in the district of Zond which I hailed from, no Martians going to admire the unique relics in the Old Temple . . .

The door was opened. That is to say, the outer, opaque panel of the pressure lock was freed so that I could slide it back, squeaking a little from the sand in its grooves, and I could see Lilith beyond the inner, transparent panel. Her face showed tense excitement. But only for seconds. As soon as she recognized me, she let dismay show through.

Faintly from within the apartment I heard Peter calling: "He's in good time—early, in fact!"

"It isn't him," Lilith replied. "It's—uh—Ray Mallin."

I missed Peter's next remark owing to the dense wet air flooding into the lock; it muffled my hearing as efficiently as cotton-wool before I adjusted to it, clearing my Eustachians with loud swallows. The pressure meter sped around its dial to the figure 3, and I expected the inner door to slide back. It didn't. The needle went to 2, and 1, and finally all the way to sea-level, zero, before I was able to pass into the interior.

Atmosphere like this was clammy and thick as fog to me. I was bewildered. I was sure that on my previous visit the pressure had only been 3, or thereabouts. Peter and Lilith were young and healthy—why should they go to the needless expense of having sea-level air in here at all? The price went up with the square of the meter-reading below the Martian standard of 10. Every breath they took cost them a hundred times what it cost me in my apartment.

But I had no chance to worry further about this anomaly. Peter had emerged into plain sight from a room over on my left, closing its door behind him a little too quickly, as if he were agitated. Also his greeting to me rang falsely hearty.

"Good to see you again! Are you completely recovered?"

"Yes, thank you," I said grim-

ly. I waited for his reply.

"Ah—what brings you back?" he said at random when the pause had become unbearable.

"Have you forgotten? You laid a charge on me. I committed myself to an obligation, and you held me to it."

"Oh! That's very kind of you," Lilith said. She also was nervous about something. Her tiny hands were pressed together apparently against the risk of them trembling visibly. "But it's no longer necessary."

"That's so!" Peter confirmed. "We—uh—we got what we wanted from another source. So please consider yourself freed from the charge, with our grateful thanks!"

His eyes strayed to the door, for all the Galaxy as if he hoped to be able to see clear through it.

It didn't take much imagination to work out that they were in the same plight as Thoder had been in. They were expecting someone whose presence they preferred not to advertise. Within the bounds of hospitality and politeness they wanted very much to get me out of the way before the important visitor showed up. But they dared not simply tell me to go to hell, because that in itself was a give-away.

Thoder's visitor had been Lugath, the last person I'd ever have guessed at. I wondered if Peter and Lilith's guest would

be someone equally improbable—Housk, for example. I resolved to be extremely obtuse and spin out my stay until they actually threw me off the premises.

"A lot of things have been happening since I left here yesterday," I began at random. "Remember you correctly deduced that when you found me by the Old Temple I'd been worked over with a nerve-whip? Well, I caught up with the people who did it to me."

That sparked interest in both of them, creating a short-lived dilemma. They'd admitted that they were looking for the Martian engineer who'd shipped home from Durrith with Lugath. It followed logically that they'd be interested in others on the same errand. But the spark was a brief one, and didn't lead to the response I'd hoped for. Presumably, then, they had information about the subject already.

Possibly they'd had it when I was here yesterday. They had, after all, displayed remarkably little concern about the way in which I'd arrived on the sandpile, half-drowned.

The dilemma of choice between hearing what I had to say and getting rid of me resolved in favor of the latter. But they were still thinking of an excuse when there came a sound that illuminated whole new areas for me, accounting in particular for the sea-level pressure in the apart-

ment—and their embarrassment.

From the room over to the left where Peter had been as I arrived, I heard the thin wailing of a very small baby.

They exchanged horrified glances. Then Peter thrust his fingers through his close-curled hair and shrugged.

"I'm sorry we're not being very welcoming," he said. "But—uh—we're minding a child for some friends of ours, and the poor thing seems to be a bit sickly. We're waiting for a doctor right now. Supposed to have been here two or three minutes ago, actually."

"I do hope you understand," Lilith chimed in, jumping enthusiastically into the spirit of the deception. I was sure beyond doubt it was a lie they were telling. But why bother to take such elaborate precautions over the presence of a baby?

"It's a big responsibility looking after someone else's kid," Peter amplified. "We've been dreadfully worried, and—"

Knock, knock, knock. They both started, decided there was no help for it, muttered an apology and went together to open the door.

"Good of you to come, *doctor!*" Peter exclaimed cheerfully. The stress on the last word was too heavy. The newcomer was no doctor, definitely. They were just hoping he would catch on to the cover-story and play along.

"The poor thing's not at all well, and we felt a doctor must see him right away!" That was Lilith, rubbing in the message. It got across.

"Don't worry about him," the visitor called through the transparent inner panel of the lock as the air thickened around him. "I'm sure it's nothing serious!"

He was a bulky man in plain brown outdoor clothing, peeling off his mask to reveal a square face, mid-brown complexion, slight red wind-chapping across his forehead.

Wind-chapping! In that case he wasn't a resident of this planet, or at any rate he hadn't been here very long. The cold dry Martian wind always affected new arrivals like this, but a matter of a few months almost invariably saw the skin harden and adjust. I re-heard by an exercise of memory the few words he'd uttered. From his accent, he wasn't any kind of a local man. He wasn't even an Earthman, as one might have expected.

I addressed him in the most fiercely accented Bear dialect I could manage.

"Gude af'noon, dooktoor!"

He disciplined himself well, for a Bear, but he didn't dare go as far as challenging me on the point and denying his nationality. He merely grunted and demanded of Lilith where the child was, taking extra pains to mask his dialect inflections and not

quite managing to hide them.

I didn't press matters any further. I stood aside as she led him into the room with the baby. By now the crying had taken on a distinctly fractious note, and I would have laid bets on the kid not being more than fifteen days old.

That young? Sick enough to need a doctor, yet abandoned by the parents into the care of friends? Even if I hadn't already had grounds to be suspicious of Peter and Lilith's good faith, I'd have had trouble swallowing such a tale.

Like most proverbs, the saying about the enemy of my enemy had holes in it. I relinquished my half-formed intention of being as open with these two as they had been with me yesterday, and offering to trade what assistance I could render for explanations of their interest in the *Hippodamia*. It was a blow—I'd been prepared to take them at face value and indeed to like them, since they'd treated me better than even Thoder, who was the last person I'd have expected to play on me the kind of dirty trick I'd suffered last night.

I'd have to be satisfied with another element of the puzzle, although it aggravated my difficulties. They had something to hide, and it led to Bear involvement in the mystery.

Centaurs, Earthsiders, Martians—apparently, considering

that Lugath had come to see Thoder—and now Bears? The possible ramifications were beginning to scare me. Not being a man accustomed to anger, I was going to find it difficult to continue without being tempted to opt out and hope nothing further would happen to me.

Peter was standing before me in acute anxiety. Had he something more to say?

He had, and in another few seconds plucked up the courage to utter it.

"Look—ah—it was very kind of you to come back and offer this information to us, even though it turned out not to be necessary any longer. I'm most impressed with the standard of Martian honour, and I want to apologize for Lilith's and my seeming to doubt you yesterday."

But this was all smokescreen. He had a point still waiting to be made.

"Since in a sense you haven't discharged the obligation, though, he went on, "perhaps you'd allow me to ask you to—ah—refrain from mentioning the fact that . . ."

Abruptly I was furious. I strode towards him, towering above his gravity-stunted form. "Are you treating Martian obligations as a kind of—*money*? This one worth so much, that one worth so much less, give me my correct change?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"Then what in the cosmos *did* you mean?" I could see now a purpose to which to turn my fury, even though it had come on me involuntarily. Let him think he'd insulted me and driven me away, rather than that I'd been clever enough to see through his flimsy deceptions. Perhaps he might not even expect me to draw conclusions from the presence of a Bear with secrets to keep. "It's the kind of sordid commercial nonsense we Martians have come to expect from Earthsiders! If you're going to spend long on my planet, you'll have to cure yourself of these shabby second-rate ideas!"

There was a moment of silence. "I'm sorry," he said at last, in such a miserable tone I almost relented. "Please put it down to my ignorance of your traditions."

"I'm not ignorant of yours," I said. "I know more about them than I care to. Goodbye!"

Outside in the blessedly thin natural air, feeling the clammy chill of excessive moisture inside my clothing, I reviewed my predicament. My plan to appeal to Peter and Lilith had come to nothing. I'd learned nothing of any great help from Housk. I must go and beard Thoder again, there was no alternative. And this time I was going to be totally on guard against him. Whatever he'd become, he was no

longer the gentle, much-respected teacher of my childhood.

Chapter 12

And yet I hesitated. For all that Thoder was integrated into the net weaving around me, so that I'd become suspicious of him too—even afraid—unless he had *been* changed, forcibly, I couldn't imagine his nature altering completely. I'd sensed nothing worse, talking to him yesterday, than this elusiveness due to his not wanting me to see Lugath when he arrived. Otherwise, he'd been the same as ever.

On the other hand I couldn't conceive any alternative to the assumption that he'd tampered with my memory, or arranged for it to be done, when I flaked out from the effects of the nerve-whipping combined with the shock of recognizing Lugath.

Granted that, could I ascribe him any honorable motive for the action?

He'd said I was in possession of much more data that I consciously knew. Suppose he was aware of the significance of events, and feared that I might inadvertently let slip some clue which would alert another interested party—say, the Bear faction concerned—leading to another such night as I'd spent at the mercy of Housk and his companions, being interrogated under

the torture of a nerve-whip?

It was an incredibly slim chain of reasoning. And yet there was something un-Thoder-like about the speed with which the mental barriers had dissolved. Possibly the gap in my memory had been designed to last only a short time. There were several indications to this effect. For one thing, the gap had been left open, not masked by false memories; even if I hadn't recovered some random fragments of the missing experience and mistaken them for elements in a vivid dream, I'd soon enough have begun to worry when I noticed the date.

And for another, when the memory did come back, an immense number of other things came with it. Simply to say that when I found myself confronting Housk I was shocked into right action was inadequate. I'd performed—accurately and immediately—mental gymnastics such as I hadn't tried for years, and had never fully mastered even under Thoder's patent tuition as a boy.

As though Thoder had wanted to compensate me in some fashion for his intrusion on my inmost privacy.

In that case was his purpose as straightforward as a desire to keep me from interfering while in pursuit of revenge? I'd made it clear that I wouldn't rest easy until I'd squared accounts with the screened interrogators. Knowing

far more than I, he might have acted from a double motive, partly to protect me, partly to stop me meddling.

He ought to have been open instead of going this roundabout road, I thought resentfully, and at once saw I was being foolish. It was no good saying he "ought" to have been frank. I'd collapsed on his floor and it must have been several hours before my consciousness was again accessible. He must have had business with Lugath which would anyhow have prevented him from indulging in long complicated explanations for my benefit, and besides, we'd not met for many years—why should he automatically assume that as an ex-pupil I was to be trusted with important secrets?

Yet his connection with Lugath had a sinister aura. Why should an Earthman pose as a Centaur—and do it well enough to pass among Centaurs, giving himself away only to me by a sheer fluke? All the conceivable explanations were way off the orbit you'd expect an unassuming Martian teacher to fly.

I came back, and back, and back to the conclusion that Thoder was no longer—possibly had not been when I studied under him—a mere teacher.

The necessity of challenging him was inescapable. Once more, though, I felt myself retreating in order to find a new line of

advance. The years during which I hadn't seen, had barely even thought of, Thoder were taking on an almost solid reality for me. I ought to find out when and under what circumstances he had left the house in the run-down quarter where I'd been raised, gone to this well-maintained home in a district frequented by offworlders. I must construct a kind of mental bridge across the intervening years.

So, before meeting him again, I had to return to that little tributary of the town where the sand piled high on the roof and strained the pylons into alarming bows.

I might as well, in fact, call again on Yuma, butter him up with compliments on his memory and thanks for putting me in touch with my fifth-degree cousin Major Housk, in the hope that his eidetic recall would short-circuit an otherwise tedious process of locating and questioning people who had known Thoder in the old days.

Gules, a helium atom or, differenced by a label argent charged with three lozenges of the first. I had no idea whose bearing that was, but it took only an elementary knowledge of heraldry to tell me whose it was likely to be. The stylized atom—two ellipses intersecting at right angles around a nucleus—suggested a physicist; the label in-

dicated an eldest son; the three lozenges superimposed on the difference most probably referred to a connection by marriage with some illustrious bearer of them as a chief device.

Hmmm. . . In a cockeyed fashion this ancient symbolic language could be extremely informative. No wonder the Centaurs, with their emphasis on kinship and their vast network of patronage, had taken it up in such a big way. And, come to that, no wonder the Bears tended to look on it as silly. They were so completely the reverse of the Centaurs. Why, I was sure that half the children of my Bear friends weren't the offspring of their mother's husband, and nobody gave a damn. A child was a child was a child, to Bears. Paternity was more or less irrelevant.

That was further than I, as a Martian, could go in admiring Bear rather than Centaur customs. Even so, forced to make a choice, I couldn't deny which I would prefer.

The display changed. Barre of vert and argent, on an inescutcheon engrailed sable, a griffin of the first crowned and collared of the second. I stared at it, baffled, for some time before concluding that while it could occasionally be illuminating, heraldic symbology could also be damnably obscure.

The door was closed, but not of course locked. It wasn't a

Martian habit to lock doors. On impulse I checked the fist I was about to bang against it, and instead slid it quietly back and stepped inside.

It was a little darker here than out on the sidewalk; sand-clearance was overdue everywhere in the district, and a good half of the transparent roof-panels were covered. I didn't have to wait for my eyes to adjust, but could see clearly at once.

I could also hear voices, Yuma's, and that of Zond King of Arms. Very quietly I crept to the door of the room in which they were talking.

"We'll simply *have* to organize a fresh grant of arms for this character!" the woman was saying. "Thirty-two quarterings, five of them quartered and one of the quartered quarters quartered again—Gehenna, it's worse than the Portuguese royal family!"

"We can't," Yuma responded in a tone like a vocalised shrug. "He hasn't done anything to deserve a grant of arms."

"It's all very well for you, with your eidetic memory," came the acid reply. "I have not only to blazon the damned thing but actually put it on paper. What's the use of arms you have to read with a microscope?"

"Well, in a sense it is a kind of microscope, isn't it?" Yuma murmured, and the woman gave a harsh chuckle. The joke escaped me completely. Then she sighed.

"You're quite right, of course. Still, with all this talent in his ancestry you'd think he'd do something with his life instead of vegetating."

"He's busy raising a family," Yuma said, and continued with sly malice, "How are you going to enjoy blazoning his kids' arms, incidentally? His wife is a Boigny de Chavannes with two quartered quarterings of her own."

"Oh, shut up." A rustling of papers, and: "Gehenna! Go find me a couple of square inches of potent-counter-potent, will you? The smallest size we have in stock."

I took one long noiseless stride back to the middle of the vestibule, reached behind me with one hand as if I'd this second entered and pushed the door to, and occupied the brief interval before Yuma appeared in recalling that potent-counter-potent was an obscure device like rows of interlocked capital T's set head-to-head.

Yuma saw me, blinked, identified me, and gave an uncertain smile. "Ah—can I help you?" he inquired.

"Who is it?" called the woman.

"Ray Mallin, who was here yesterday!"

"Uh-huh. Don't be too long with that stuff, will you? I need it for the second arms in the dexter quarter."

Yuma sighed. Before he could speak again, I did. I said, "As

a matter of fact I didn't come about anything important, so don't let me hold you up."

"Thanks." He crossed the vestibule to a wall-hung cupboard which I recalled from my days as Thoder's pupil. Then, it had held some of the many objects he used to dramatize his precepts for young children, whereas now it was stuffed to overflowing with tiny jars of paint, rolls of gold and silver leaf, and packets of heraldic devices and field-patterns in various sizes from large to nearly invisible.

While he sorted through several packets in search of the one he wanted, I continued, "I really came to thank you and let you know I did get in touch with my cousin from Centaurus."

"Major Housk?" Yuma said. "Running short of those," he added to himself, singling out a packet of inch-high *fleurs de lys* in assorted heraldic colours and putting it back on the shelf.

"You must have an amazing memory," I told him warmly.

"I'm an eidetic," he shrugged. "Some people are, some aren't. It's nothing I can take credit for." He found what he wanted, a bit of plioform with the design on it, which could be trimmed to size and pasted in the appropriate space on an escutcheon.

Not easily reached by flattery, that was clear. I cast around for a way of continuing the subject, and at once saw an obvious path.

"But your ancestors must have been remarkable people to endow you with the talent! You must have a fascinating genealogy."

I could tell I'd broken through by the casual—too casual—tone of his reply. "I guess it is pretty interesting. Though since it's my own I'm prejudiced about it."

"Does your family go back a long way on Mars?"

Three-quarters of an hour, it took for him to explain all the ramifications of his family. It wasn't boredom which made me struggle to conceal impatience—he was an expert in love with his job, and it's always a pleasure to hear enthusiasts holding forth. Besides, his family was interesting; it hailed from six different continents on Earth and all the sizeable towns on Mars.

I was, however, itching to work around to the subject of Thoder, and finally had to cut the corners off his orbit. I asked, straight out, how come Zond King of Arms had taken over Thoder's old home.

"Thoder?" Yuma blinked at me. "Now there's a man with an ancestry! I worked his genealogy through out of curiosity, and it doesn't show anything like the strains you'd expect to produce a—"

I steered him gently back to my question.

"Why, the house just came

available at the right time. Thoder had been offered this job at the College of Serendipity—”

“What?”

“Oh, you’re thinking of what my boss told you, that he’d retired. In the literal sense he has—he’s Professor Emeritus, doesn’t do much actual teaching any more but gives a lecture course . . .”

“At the College of Serendipity?”

“Yes.” Yuma was puzzled at the intensity of my reaction. “That’s an institute up on main-surface, about five miles—”

“I know where it is, thank you,” I said grimly.

I also knew what it was. Insofar as there was anything to appeal to Centaurs on Mars, it was the Martian College of Heralds, their link with Earthside sources going back to medieval times. And insofar as there was anything here to appeal to Bears, it was the College of Serendipity, a crank organization of the purest water. Like all gamblers, Bears tended to objectify the concept of “luck,” to be superstitious, to carry charms, to perform meaningless little rituals. The most high-sounding term for luck was *serendipity*, the faculty of chancing upon good fortune; the College, believe it or not, claimed to teach you how to be lucky!

No, Thoder *couldn’t* have sunk to that level—I wouldn’t let my-

self credit it for a single moment!

Chapter 13

Before I could question him further, though, Yuma was called back to work by his boss. I spent a little while longer wandering around the neighbourhood looking for anybody else who might remember Thoder and tell me more about his departure, but I found only casual acquaintances who didn’t miss him particularly.

At last I rebuked myself for wasting time. I was using the excuse of making inquiries about him in order to postpone a direct confrontation. Exactly as I had done yesterday, I hailed a cab and set off to his new address.

It was an eerie sensation to be going past all the same places in the same sequence as previously, as though I were trapped in a sort of tempora echo, or following a spiral around a centre, each traverse of the repeating pathway bringing me fractionally closer to enlightenment; Old Temple to Grand Canal Apartments to the heralds’ place to Thoder’s . . .

The same again tomorrow, the day after, and indefinitely?

The sense of being caught in an echo was redoubled when I once more stood face to face with Thoder. He had precisely the air of disappointment Lilith had betrayed, due to my not being the

person expected at this time; likewise, he was as astonished as she had been at my being who I was. He was agitated for certain, or he'd have kept a tighter rein on his emotions.

But instead of acting as Lilith and Peter had done, and attempting to cover up with a hollow falsehood, he sighed and resigned himself to the course of events. Standing back from the door, he silently gestured for me to enter. I complied warily, wondering if I was about to be ambushed.

"So it didn't work," he said when he had pulled the door to.

"No, it didn't work." I omitted to explain what had caused it to break down. "So I'm back, and this time I'd like a civiler welcome than I had from you yesterday."

Another sigh as he waved for me to enter the room where we had talked before. "Yes . . . It's very seldom that I panic, but then it's also very seldom that I become involved in events which can affect the whole of human history. Are you used to that? I imagine not, from what you told me last evening."

He settled in his chair with his careful old-man precision. "I don't know whether you now harbor a grudge against me," he went on, "or whether you've been able to think the matter through with proper clarity and assess my motives. Hm?"

I weighed my words. "If you'd

intended me to forget permanently, you're skilled enough to have done a thorough job instead of a patchwork one liable to be mashed accidentally. On the other hand, it's out of character for you to have done it at all." I hesitated. "Though that isn't a very persuasive argument, because I've learned something about you which makes me think you're *living* out of character nowadays."

"Am I?" He chuckled. "How's that?"

"Are you really lecturing at the College of Serendipity?"

"Yes, why not? I'm Professor Emeritus of life-adjustment there." The assertion was almost belligerent, and I discerned a shadow passing across his face—but it might have been illusory.

"Why not?" I echoed. "Well . . . never mind. The important thing is this: last night you tampered very extensively with my memory, blotting out the better part of thirty-six hours' recall. What in the name of the Zodiac did you do it for?"

"It seemed the kindest thing to let you carry on with your normal life between trips, rather than risk being crushed between the millstones of gigantic opposed forces like a grain of corn."

"I guess you thought it was too easy to be frank with me!"

"I considered it." He didn't blink. "Lugath argued against the idea—he thinks you showed up

too conveniently on Durrith—but that wasn't what decided me. I couldn't have raised your consciousness even to light trance level before you'd slept away three or four hours. You'd been nerve-whipped worse than anyone else I'd ever seen. Moreover, as you yourself pointed out—quoting me!—pain is a reinforcement. You'd had enough pain to disconnect your top-level drives and key you into a positive dynamo of vengeance-need."

"You coin a good phrase," I taunted. "So it was all done for my own sweet sake and I have no business coming back to complain to you—is that it?" I leaned forward.

"For pity's sake, why don't you stop prevaricating and admit that you were afraid I'd meddle in something too big for me and foul it up?"

He didn't reply at once. He hoisted himself to his feet and crossed to the window, looking both ways along the sidewalk. Returning, he stood gazing down at me while I met his eyes fixedly.

"All right," he said abruptly. "I'd not have said you were one of my most successful pupils, but you're a long way from stupid, and the fact that you came back in a fit state to talk instead of jumping to the conclusion that I was a villain and a traitor indicates a passable degree of rationality. What's more, the way

things are turning out we shall need every ounce of help we can get . . . He combed his white hair with his thin gnarled fingers.

"What do you make of the affair you've stumbled into, so far?"

"Damnably little. Something about the *Hippodamia*'s last trip is worrying the Centaurs—the fact that Lugath is apparently an Earthman posing as a Centaur connects but doesn't explain. Earthsiders are interested in whatever it is, and I think Bears also, and Martians in the shape of yourself. Presumably it's enormous. You just said it could affect the whole of history. How?"

He sat down again, shaking his head. "So much to make clear!" he grumbled. "I'm getting old, Ray, and I find it difficult to know where to begin."

"The beginning might be a good place!"

"That way it could take weeks . . . Tackle it from this point, perhaps. Ray, how does it feel to be a young Martian in this day and age?"

"Pretty depressing," I said. I instanced reasons: the shabbiness, the neglect, the second-best-will-do attitude I saw all around me; the absence of such a thing as Martian nationality even though we couldn't live in comfort on Earth, our legal home world; even the way some-

one like Peter could cheapen the honorable traditions we'd developed when we were struggling pioneers breaking the back of a hostile planet.

"There's more to it than you can see. You're too close and too involved." Thoder leaned back and put his fingertips together, a pose I remembered from innumerable childhood lectures. "But to show you clearly why there's more, and what that extra involves, I shall have to set the scene. Name me a major scientific breakthrough of the past century."

I hesitated, and he forestalled my answer. "I'm sorry. I still have this lifetime habit of making other people do the work, so that it fixes clearly in their minds. I'll save you the trouble. There has been *no* major scientific breakthrough since the beginning of the twenty-second century, when we established the four-space drive on a reliable footing and turned interstellar travel from an adventure into a matter of routine."

"But surely—"

"I'm not arguing, Ray. I'm telling you. It is even a tenable thesis that the last new concept in human thinking was Einstein's insight into the equivalence of matter and energy. Step back further yet—*il faut reculer pour mieux sauter*, as I kept telling you when you were a kid."

"One must go back to jump

forward better," I parroted.

"Shut up. Merely because I tend to ramble more as I get older is no excuse for you to do so. There are certain key inventions in human evolution—mental evolution—which one can call totally novel. Name some!"

"Ah . . . The knife, the bow, control of fire, the wheel—"

"Textiles, literacy, the alphabet, numeracy, the invention of money, the liberation of thermal energy, the liberation of nuclear energy, and the computer. There are a few others, but those should indicate to you the points of the curve I'm trying to establish."

I squinted at nothing, visualizing a graph with time on the *x*-axis, log scale, and technological advancement on the *y*-axis, ditto.

"What you're saying," I ventured after a pause, "is that we should have had dozens—scores—of comparable new concepts since the Industrial Revolution on Earth."

Thoder almost crowded with delight. "Yes! Yes! Ray, you must have been completing your education since I last saw you—I expected to have to lead you to this by slow and painful stages!"

"Wait a moment!" I objected. "There *have* been dozens. Atomic theory was at least as powerful a tool as the reciprocating engine employing heat-energy—in fact the two were interdependent,

because they both relied on developments in chemical—”

“Last century? Last *two* centuries?”

I was silent. Every suggestion that sprang to my mind was open to the charge that it wasn’t a new concept but an elaboration of an old one, except the faster-than-light drive. And we’d dealt with that.

“All right, let’s tackle another aspect. Do you believe there’s a pattern—putting it in wholly subjective terms, a purpose—to human history?”

“You used to tell us that each successive generation formulated such a purpose according to its best knowledge, and had to be prepared for the next generation to alter or even to reject that purpose, and that any other view of human destiny was arbitrary. I’ve never seen any reason to disagree with what you taught.”

“Good,” Thoder approved, and added with disturbing emphasis, “I hope for your sake you mean that all the way to the floor of your mind! If you don’t—but I’m getting ahead of myself.

“Purpose is essential. Human beings having the mental attitudes they do, once we’d become self-analytical enough to start questioning our motives in human rather than in artifical theological terms we had consciously to create this series of malleable purposes. We hit on one and called it ‘progress’.”

“An alleged hyperbolic series of events plotted on a graph of which one axis is calibrated in starships and the other in numbers of people undergoing psychotherapy.”

“Did I say that?” Thoder demanded, and when I nodded he grinned in satisfaction. “A striking phrase—I must revive it! But I’m not out to blast holes in our predecessor’s mistakes; it’s a futile pastime even though it may be entertaining. Ray, what is our ultimate and absolutely indispensable resource?”

I sat for the space of five of his slow Martian breaths while I thought back and back. I was satisfied now that he had not meant to offend me when he doctored my memory, but would have explained and apologized later, when this mysterious history-changing pattern of events had resolved. Accordingly I wanted to parallel his thinking as closely as I could, so that I would be able to share his conclusions and perhaps give him the help he’d hinted at needing.

“Ourselves,” I said finally.

He actually clapped that, hands crisply uttering a sharp explosion. “Our genetic endowment, to make it a little more exact. Now, let me set you one or two more questions, and I think you may very well answer the riddle yourself.

“First: what’s the basic handicap of being a Martian?”

"The oxygen-need of the developing embryo," I answered promptly. "If they could lick that, there could really be a Martian race. As it is, we're a kind of amphibian, having to go back to the ocean to breed."

"Hence there are very few of us," he nodded. "Second: what's the fundamental difference between Centaurs and Bears?"

I stared at him. "You know as well as I do! It's not in their physical type, their genetic endowment, or anything—it's solely in the way they organize their society. Bears are permissive and casual, Centaurs rigid and disciplined."

"Precisely. It affects everything, doesn't it—including their family lives, the way they plan and bring up their offspring?" Thoder hunched forward in his chair. "Ray, do you think this is mere happenstance?"

For the space of three more of his breaths, which rang and rang in my ears, I could not find words. Then at last I forced a weak, hopeless complaint past my dry stiff lips.

"What do they think we are, Thoder? Neanderthalers of the twenty-fourth century, due to be cast on the rubbish-dump of evolution and left there—*rotting*?"

Chapter 14

"If that's how you feel"—Thoder's reproof was sharp—"plainly

you didn't mean what you said about human destiny. I'm a Martian too, remember. Our pride and strength has been in transcending hostile circumstances. Here's another—is it to defeat us?"

"Is there any question of victory and defeat? Isn't it a decision that's been taken out of our hands?"

"No, it's not a decision. It's simply an acceptance of the necessity to be what we are. Let me make sure you're talking about the same thing that I am. Martians are . . . ?"

"An experiment that proved abortive." I wiped perspiration off my face. "We were superseded by Bears and Centaurs."

"In effect, yes. But I must condense the rest of it. Look, Ray, we're enormously clever as a species. We can break the most fundamental laws of the universe with impunity and outrace light to the stars. What do we do when we get there? The same things we've been doing for millenia on our planet of origin. As though we'd passed a peak of achievement and begun to decay.

"It was as early as the twenty-first century that the more farsighted planners realized the underlying cause. Gradually Earthside society had begun to homogenize. More and more groups formerly differentiated by linguistic conditioning and local tradi-

tions had adopted the universal goal of physical well being and the associated concepts. We had more data than any man could become acquainted with in a lifetime, yet we were unable to deduce novel conclusions from this welter of information. Why? Two hypotheses were proposed, and it so happened that they dovetailed beautifully into a grand over-all plan for future human development.

"First it was argued that this social homogeneity led to decline of stimulus. A comfortable tendency to conformity supplanted the urge to explore, break new ground and startle the world with new inventions. The last spectacular surge of technical progress occurred with the four-space drive.

"Also it was argued that the sum of our vaunted ability to alter our environment, instead of being evolutionarily conditioned by it like non-intelligent creatures, had surpassed our ability to reason about what we were doing. In other words, we needed a talent, extra psychological muscle, if you like. The talent existed in embryonic form—as witness the not-too-rare ability to grapple with mental concepts such as four-space, which nowhere touches the instinctive world-picture derived from normal sensory data.

"How best to ensure that this double lack was fulfilled?

"Before the advent of the star-

dive, people thought we were going to be confined indefinitely to the Old System. Mars was the only other planet where men might develop their own society and culture, differenced from Earth's by all the factors which have affected you and me. But, as you said, Martians can at best be amphibious, dive back into a high-oxygen environment to bear their children or risk them being morons . . . Yes?"

I'd been thinking in parallel with what he was saying, and scores of hitherto unrelated snippets were combining into a distasteful whole. I said, "If I've followed you correctly, you're about to say that the distinction between Bears and Centaurs is a planned one." Zond King of Arms complaining that with so much talent in his family this man ought to do something more with his life than simply raise children . . . Yuma saying heraldry was a kind of microscope; yes, a means of studying genetic endowment!

"Correct. There was no means of telling whether we yet had sufficient skill to manipulate our heritage and actually breed for the talent we felt was indispensable to further advancement, or whether the working of chance would throw it up faster." Thoder parodied the tossing of a coin. "So a pair of strongly opposed societies was devised: the Bears, happy-go-lucky, casual,

taking life as it came, and the Centaurs, thinking hard about everything and especially about their descendants."

"While the Martians, overtaken by events, were left on oneside." I sounded bitter. And why not? I couldn't yet tell how Thoder came by his information, but he spoke with tremendous authority.

"Not entirely. In fact, we exercise influence out of all proportion to our numbers. Our traditions, abortive though the plan behind them was, are still closer to the main line of the future than present-day Earthside customs."

"I guess that's a consolation," I acknowledged sourly. "So—how far are the results to hand now? I take it that we didn't in fact know enough to plan our own breeding, and that the odds are on the Bears to—ah—carry the torch of the future?"

He gazed at me steadily. "No, Ray. Exactly the opposite. We proved to know enough and to spare about our genetic endowment. The talent which the early planners identified has turned up six generations earlier than their most optimistic estimate."

"What? Among *Centaurs*?" I thought of the stiff-necked, narrow-minded authoritarians I knew too well for comfort, and felt a pang of dismay at the idea that the destiny of humanity lay along that road.

Thoder reached behind him to a small locked cabinet; at full stretch of his Martian-long arm, he twisted the combination to open and produced a scroll which he shook out with a flourish and held for me to examine.

It was a coat of arms, divided into quarters. The first and fourth quarters held the two halves of the Tyrant of Centaurus's bearing—the silver stars and comets on black, the tiger's head. The other two quarters displayed devices whose significance I didn't recognize.

"Are you trying to tell me," I said with astonishment, "that the Tyrant of Centaurus has the talent?"

"In little. You know your recent history, I'm sure—you know that in their singleminded determination to make Centaur society an absolutely planned one, people over-reached themselves and made ghastly false estimates, bringing economic crisis and near-disaster, until the pressure of circumstances threw up the first Tyrant, Boris ben Solomon. He confounded the predictions rife about Centaur collapse—people were pointing to the Bears' capacity for muddling through and saying this was obviously the course to pursue, and Tyrant Boris made them eat their words . . . But of course this isn't the bearing of the present Tyrant Basil."

"Whose, then? Not one of his

sons—they'd bear their father's arms with a difference until he died or abdicated."

"Strictly that's so. I didn't know you'd studied heraldry, but—Never mind that!" Thoder rolled up the arms. "Bluntly: if it were ever granted, which is something I hope devoutly won't happen, this bearing would belong to the son of a rather remarkable courtesan who at the age of seventeen has—ah—*contrived* a morganatic marriage with the Tyrant Presumptive, Basil's eldest son Barnaby."

"You said," I mused aloud, "that you hope the arms won't ever be granted. Because you don't want Tyrant Basil to recognize his grandson as legitimate, or—?" I stopped dead.

"Yes?" Thoder prompted gently.

"Are you trying to tell me that this child was aboard the *Hippodamia*?" *Tamer of horses, hence, tamer of Centaurs!* "That he's been kidnapped from his parents and brought to Mars?"

"It's not as cruel as you think," Thoder parried. "There were twins, a boy and a girl, but the mother and father don't know—the delivery was Caesarean and under anaesthetic. And the girl is carrying enough of the endowment to make her an exceptional child, though only the boy has the whole of it."

"But you can't keep that sort of thing secret! They must know!"

Why else would orders have come from Centaurus to track me down and question me under torture about the *Hippodamia*?"

A long pause followed. Finally Thoder said, "We're sure they don't know the full story, but... well, Lugath's engineer, whom you replaced, fell sick with Larchman's disease. As you probably know, it brings fever and vociferous delirium. Lugath dared not risk trying to take him off Durirth. He banked on the fact that the sick man was himself not party to the whole secret, engaged you, and ran for it. But in hospital on Durirth the engineer must have let slip enough hints in his ravings to alert the Centaur authorities.

"Also, of course, Bears and Centaurs and Earthsiders have secret agents in each other's territories."

"Like Lugath?"

"His status is irrelevant, and so is mine!" Thoder said sharply, then relented. "Oh—yes, I suppose you'd class us as such. But not in the sense of 'spy.' We're... instruments of the planners responsible for mapping out mankind's future. The point I was driving at was that knowledge of genetics isn't a Centaur monopoly. Bears have wondered for a long time about the talents emerging in Boris's descendants, and—There he is!"

He jumped from his chair with incongruous sprightliness for a

staid old man and hurried to reach the door before his visitor could knock. It was, of course, Lugath.

He stared at me in dismay, and Thoder launched into a long justification of his action in admitting me to the secret he claimed was so well-kept. Lugath contained himself for some minutes, but finally cut the old man short.

"The hell with this!" he rasped. "The kid has gone, and that's beyond doubt. So either the Centaurs have taken him back, or—or someone else has interfered. How in the galaxy do we trace him without alerting Bears, Centaurs and everybody from here to Sagittarius?"

Thoder glanced at me. "You don't approve of what we're doing, do you, Ray? Perhaps you're glad to hear we've lost track of the baby? I grant that in some sense it's inhuman to do as we've done. But consider: when he grows up he'll have an IQ at the limits of the measurable, empathy topping 2000, Weigand scale, and virtually every heritable talent from music to mathematics, *all transmissible to his descendants!* You want that to be a monopoly for the rigid, pompous, narrow-minded Centaurs?"

I hesitated. He'd practically read my mind. My first reaction had been to recall all the rumors I'd heard about kidnapping for slavery, and to wonder how

many of them were founded on actual events like this. I was repelled—yet this was gentle, wise old Thoder, whom I'd known since boyhood.

"What's your plan, then?" I whispered.

"To educate him on Mars. Then, when he's grown, to use the random mixing of genetic lines available in Bear society to spread a kind of ferment through half the human race."

Was that an admirable plan for mankind's evolution, or a piece of callous bloodstock breeding more suited to raising domestic animals? I was still at a loss. Perhaps if I had a satisfactory answer to one more question—

Lugath spoke angrily before I could frame it. "Why stand here gossiping with Mallin? Didn't you hear me? The Centaurs may be getting ready to lift the kid off Mars this moment, and years of work are going to waste! If Housk got as close to the truth as interrogating Mallin—it's a miracle he didn't reach any of my officers who were better informed, but I told them to keep out of sight, and so far . . . In any case, as I said the other night when you wanted to be open with Mallin, I'm not happy about him either! He turned up entirely too patly on Durrith. We may have kept our secrets well from the Centaurs, but Earthsiders are too damned sympathetic to the Bears, and Earth is the place where it's

most difficult to keep the long-term plan from—”

I said, “Who are Peter Nizam and Lilith Choy?”

Lugath, interrupted, lost track of what he was saying. Thoder answered crisply. “Two extremely prominent young members of the pro-Bear faction on Earth, who have been agitating for a rift between the Old System and the Centaurs and a permanent alliance with the Bears.”

“What would they be likely to do with the baby?”

Lugath and Thoder exchanged bewildered glances. Thoder said, “Deliver him to the Bears, naturally. And that would be a disaster second only to his remaining among Centaurs, to have his mind straitjacketed for life. Even if they could keep from boasting about their own cleverness—which I doubt, and which would quite possibly result in war—if that boy grows up pro-Centaur or pro-Bear rather than pro-mankind it will ruin the pattern of growth which the most selfless and dedicated planners of all time have evolved for us.”

“And,” I said, “what is all this to do with *you*?”

There was a silence. At length Thoder gave a shrug. “Since you know so much already, I might as well confess the rest. The quarterings you didn’t recognize on the arms I showed you—the ones which don’t belong to Tyrant Basil—are those of my own

family. That very remarkable person, his mother, is my granddaughter Shilene.”

Chapter 15

Still I hesitated. When finally I chose sides for good and all, for better or worse, it wasn’t for selfless, dedicated reason. Not really.

Oh, there was some element of sympathy at the back of my mind. I could think of the Thoder I’d know as teacher-parent, recognize how much he loved children, imagine what it had cost him to part from his own—for never till this moment had I even suspected he might be a father—yet the idea remained remote, detached from me here and now.

On the other hand . . .

I hadn’t had a chance, and would have had to retreat into extended time in order to get the chance, to consider and analyze what he’d told me about Centaurs and Bears. It all made sense at first glance—why, I myself had intuitively realized that from the very beginning of interstellar colonization the Bear archetype must have looked northwards from the Old System, the Centaur archetype southwards, and this was hardly likely to be an accident.

Nonetheless, of three fates open before a child of such superlative genetic endowment as

the one he'd described—not counting death or injury during this ridiculous undercover squabble over him—was I automatically to opt for what Thoder wanted? Was I convinced that it was in his, our, everybody's best interests that the baby should take the kind of pathway into life that I'd done? I'd more or less rejected Thoder's guidance, even if I'd wandered back into touch with him as a result of circumstances. Hadn't he barely finished telling me himself that the Martian way of life was an abandoned dead end, an alley pointing towards the future but leading nowhere, as obsolete as plans for a multi-generation interstellar ark on the day they tested the four-space drive?

I'd agree instantly that to return the baby to Centaur care would be to straitjacket his mind. But to let the Bears raise him didn't strike me as so alarming. Wild declarations of the risk of war following Bear boasting about their cleverness—this was a dreadful exaggeration. You just couldn't contemplate wars between the stars. The resources involved in mounting one would ruin the party who tried it, and the Centaurs' own worshipped computers would say so unequivocally.

Even if I were wrong, even if some astonishing new breakthrough proved that it was possible to have that war, the ran-

dom hammering their society would receive would outrun Centaur capacity to adjust, while Bears—flexible, free and easy—would pick up the pieces and made do. The Old System would probably be pulverized, in Thoder's own simile like a grain of wheat between gigantic millstones. But what now did it boast worth keeping? Earthsiders had abdicated the crown of history in favor of the subjects of a monstrous laboratory experiment; as for Mars, it was a vermiform appendix serving no purpose any longer.

Peter and Lilith had been kind to me, not only saved my life, but dealt with me as a person and appealed to my Martian honor. They hadn't fully understood its implications, but at least they'd recognized its existence. Housk and his companions had treated me as a thing, to be squeezed with a nerve-whip until the juice of my knowledge trickled out. In Centaur space, for doing little more than speak my mind, I'd been discarded like an out-of-tolerance spare part. In Bear space I'd served with people I could call my friends, loved girls who thought of me as *me*, not simply "gangling giant" . . . Hell, I'd considered marrying one of them!

So the selfless conclusion, when the scales were charged on both sides, was—better the Bears. But I didn't come to it. I came to the selfish conclusion.

I could not stand to think that everything I prized, everything I'd lived by, should be scrapped, that the very concept "Martian" should be a hollow drum, noisy and empty. And if there was no longer any hope of building on a Martian basis towards a grand future for mankind, then at least let traces of what I valued survive in the memory of a child who would shake the stars when he grew to adulthood. It was not and could never be enough that genes were transmitted. Set a boy and a girl on a new world, perfectly fit for their survival—when they bred, could you call their children human beings in anything but shape? What made me a man wasn't in a sticky fluid crawling with whip-tailed monozygote cells. You couldn't centrifuge it, radiate it, modify it with mutagenic compounds and set it under a microscope.

But it wasn't intangible, either. It wasn't beyond control, and most of all it wasn't inaccessible to the operation of man's greatest single gift; the talent of binding time over millions of years. You could plan to direct it. You could choose one part of it over another as bestowing a higher chance of survival. You could look at it long and soberly and say at last, "As far as I, here and now and admitting ignorance, can tell, that is bad and this is good."

I said, "They had the baby at

Grand Canal Apartments a few hours ago, and a Bear came to collect him."

The moment after I'd made the announcement, a reason sprang to mind why it could not possibly be correct. The trip home to the Old System from Durrith had taken almost two months, even with Lugath's improbably powerful drivers, yet the child I'd heard crying at Peter and Lilith's had sounded very young indeed, and certainly no more than two weeks old, if as much.

That left me completely at a loss. Seconds ticked away during which both Thoder and Lugath demanded how I knew, until at last I amended my statement weakly.

"Or rather . . . there was a baby there, because I heard it crying. But it must have been much too young."

"Too young?" Lugath echoed. "Did you see it? No? Then—"

"Hearing is enough," Thoder told him curtly. "But hold on. Lugath, how was the baby transported? In a ship like yours, with limited passenger accommodation, there must have been some risk of his crying being overheard."

"Of course not! We contracted him. As far as he was concerned the voyage lasted only a matter of an hour or two."

"I don't quite—" Thoder began. I broke in. "Then it could have

been the same baby I heard at Peter and Lilith's!" And for Thoder's benefit, I amplified: "What Captain Lugath means is that though the baby was travelling with the ship he wasn't in the same four-spatial mode as the rest of it. He was in a mode very close to normal space and subject to relativistic time-contraction . . . Cosmos!"

"What's wrong?"

"No wonder I had so much trouble with those damned drivers! It's like—like trying to fly a fast aircraft with a ground-anchor catching in the rocks below!"

"Any time you want a recommendation from me," Lugath said soberly, "you can have it. My own engineer couldn't have made such fast time back to the Old System, and he knew about the special compartment in the alternate four-space mode."

"If you'd told *me*," I retorted, "I'd have got you here a week sooner!"

"Stop wrangling," Thoder sighed. "We assume it was the same baby you heard at Grand Canal Apartments. Tell us the rest—and describe the Bear who came to collect him."

I did so. Thoder snapped his fingers.

"Do you know him?" Lugath demanded.

"It sounds like a man called Jives, who enrolled at the College for a two-term course

about—let me see—seven or eight weeks ago. I've been wondering about him ever since he arrived. He claims to be a manufacturer in a small way of business on Goldstar, but he checked out so high in the routine life-adjustment tests I was convinced he must be lying. His grades on personal power and social conformity were—Oh, to the Coalsack with the details! What counts is that I can swear to his being a Bear secret agent."

"Sent to cover the arrival of the baby?"

"Of course not, unless their espionage is fabulously efficient. No, more likely he was just ordered to enroll at the College and evaluate the effect it's having on the Bear students who form ninety-two per cent of the student body. Bears are sensitive about outside interference with the running of their society; they don't want any single influence to become dominant, and a few of our former graduates have done—let's say improbably well since they left Mars."

"Comweb!" Lugath said, and jumped to his feet.

We could hear him clearly through the flimsy wall of the adjacent room, but what he said was obviously linked to an association-code. Only the agitated tone of his voice might have indicated to an outsider that his conversation about improved

grades of nuclear fuel reflected something far deeper and more dangerous.

"Are you sure about this man Jives?" I asked Thoder.

He gave a sad bitter smile. "Still thinking that the post of a professor at the College of Serendipity is unworthy of an honest man? I assure you it's not. I instruct my class in the exercise of the skills which the ignorant describe as 'luck,' and most of them are techniques you'd recognize from the mental games I used to make you play as a child. Stretching time, for example, to give extra opportunity for analyzing a crisis situation—I still teach that in a play-context, but it's the Bears' favorite gambling games I use nowadays." He leaned forward.

"Much more must have happened to you today than simply overhearing a baby in Grand Canal Apartments. Tell me!"

Lugath had switched to another code now, and was talking about a complicated series of bets on a Bear athletics championship, the Zodiac Girdle Meet.

I summarized the path I'd taken to bring me back here.

"An ingenious notion to take advantage of Yuma's eidetic memory and short-cut your inquiries," Thoder commented. "But I'm afraid you were lucky to learn even what little you did from him. I deliberately covered up my connections with the College



of Heralds—you'll realize that if anyone were bright enough to wonder why heralds and luck-teachers were the two groups in the Old System currently exercising most influence over the great power-blocs he might stumble on what I've been telling you . . . And you found Housk in the room under the Temple, did you?"

"You know about it?"

"Oh, yes. In fact I half-suspected that was where you'd been taken for your interrogation. I recognized the description of the stone chair; there are very few like it on Mars. It has alarming implications, incidentally, but they'll have to wait."

"What are they?"

"Mainly that the anti-Earthside sentiment common among Martians these days—witness yourself, if you'll forgive my being personal—must have turned sourer than I expected, if it's led to a Centaur being informed of that secret room. I imagined it was known only to a handful of native Martians."

I wanted to ask many more questions about that, but there was a far worse problem troubling me. I said, "What I don't understand is how in the galaxy you lost track of this child!"

"Paradoxical, isn't it? We bring off a coup at a distance of light-years, organize one of the most flawless smuggling operations in history, and then we're laid low

by what you identified as the basic drawback of being Martians.

"We dared not chance exposing the child to conditions which might harm his growth, especially the formation of his unique brain. Oxygen lack doesn't affect a baby as badly as an embryo, but we'd already taken great risks by—by kidnapping him and shipping him as Lugath described. But we needed to absorb him into Martian society as quickly as we could, to distract the curious who might otherwise wonder about his origins.

"So we arranged to hide him in the perfect setting for a baby, a maternity clinic. We gave him the borrowed identity of a child who failed to come to term and died before delivery. We thought we'd taken care of every eventuality. I simply didn't believe failure was possible. Yet we failed!

"In view of what you've told me, I'd bet that what wrecked our beautiful scheme was the fact that, as Martian maternity clinics have to be maintained at Earthside sea-level pressure, they are staffed by Earthside immigrants rather than Martians.

"Suppose a pro-Bear Earthsider on the clinic staff mentioned to a Bear friend—conceivably Jives himself—that there was something suspicious about this baby. Noting the coincidence of timing between this and the *Hippodamia*, knowing from Peter Nizam that Centaurs were suf-

ficiently interested in the ship's last voyage to do what they did to you, it would take no great mental agility to suspect a connection. As I said, an interest in genetics isn't confined to Centaurs with their love of heraldry. So far they *can* only suspect, but if they've made off with the baby their guesses must be perilously close to home!"

Chapter 16

I still wanted to learn how the baby had been taken from the clinic, but there was no point in asking Thoder—if he'd known, he'd have acted on the knowledge. In any case, we were interrupted by the return of Lugath, wiping his face.

"I'm having Jives checked on," he said. "And there'll be a watch kept on every Bear ship a-planet from now on. No Bear ship has applied for takeoff clearance before noon tomorrow, which is a mercy. If they knew what they'd got, they'd be hell-bent to get the boy out of Old System immediately."

He kicked a chair around, glowering at me. "And to think I imagined my part of the work was over when I docked!"

"What is your part of the work?" I asked.

He glanced at Thoder, who spread his hands. "Go ahead. Martian loyalty is the least negotiable kind there is."

"Well . . . There's a handful of ships—about fifteen in all—working in each direction out of Old System, which support an intelligence network. Man's a cagey and suspicious animal, and to direct the evolution of his society takes a great deal of information which neither Bears nor Centaurs will supply merely for the asking. Equally, Bears and Centaurs spy on one another, but I have the impression we're the most successful of the three operators. I once shipped two Bear agents off Mars—come to think of it, they were bound for Durrith—and I knew who they were but I don't believe they ever suspected us. So I notified the Centaur authorities, and a couple of times since then I've been given small confidential jobs to handle for them, on the basis of my proven trustworthiness . . ." He smiled without humor.

"Thoder!" he resumed. "If the worst comes to the worst, can we openly charge Jives with kidnapping?"

"The kid's Martian cover identity should be proof against local inquiries," Thoder answered. "Martians won't be inclined to inquire too closely into it, because—as witness Ray here—we're all so damned sensitive about the way we're treated nowadays."

"Set that as the line of retreat, then," Lugath said. "How about lines of advance?" He seemed al-

most to have forgotten my presence in the last few seconds. "Put on Kanaiken's shoes, will you?"

Instantly I recognized another of the games Thoder had drilled us through as children: "putting on so-and-so's shoes" meant thinking oneself into the place of the person named. I had no idea who Kanaiken might be, but I assumed from what Thoder now said that he must be Jives's superior, perhaps the local chief of Bear intelligence operations.

Add one to the long list of things I'd learned from Thoder as a mere piece of mental gymnastics, that now proved to have applications under truly deadly circumstances.

"Kanaiken!" Lugath said. "What do you know about the child?"

Thoder rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We-ell . . . For some years past, possibly for as long as a generation, our people have been showing interest in Tyrant Boris's descendants, so we know that certain unusual genetic lines are being selected for in Centaur space. This is the subject to which the story I've been told most likely relates—"

"What story?"

"Too fast. I know that the Centaurs have been showing concern about a ship called the *Hippodamia*, one of their own. I probably know that this ties back to an engineer who fell sick on

Durrith and was replaced by a Martian. I don't know what the Centaurs learned from the sick man, but educated guessing shows that it's either the cargo or the passengers which concern them, more likely than the crew. I dare not tackle the crew, since they're Centaurs, with the single exception of the replacement engineer. I most likely proceed on the assumption that a Martian serving aboard a Centaur ship is less sympathetic than most people in Old System towards the Bears. Accordingly I don't move to contact him directly, but invited the assistance of two Earth nationals with strong Bear sympathies, Peter Nizam and Lilith Choy."

"Do they learn anything?"

"Rather little, except that someone—probably the Centaur agents permanently stationed here—has become sufficiently worried to nerve-whip the Martian engineer, information that causes me to revise my estimate of the matter's importance upwards. Centaurs don't rattle easily, but this is panicky."

"A human target. At this stage, my primary assumption is a spy with valuable information."

"Do you have to modify this?"

"Rapidly. A pro-Bear employee of a maternity clinic reports suspicious circumstances surrounding a child of obviously non-Martian stock. The report reaches me through Jives, or another

Bear agent, or perhaps Peter Nizam and Lilith Choy."

"What brings those two to Mars?"

"Discussions regarding pro-Bear activity on Earth. Anyway—the other thing besides a spy with important data which could so alarm the Centaurs would be the loss of an important genetic endowment which for some reason is not duplicable. Hypothesis: the illegitimate offspring of an outstanding line. I have endowment tests run at the clinic—basic ones which won't attract comment, not full-scale genotyping. The results suggest puerile genius. Hmm! In this case my gamble in kidnapping the child is based on more than a hunch—on the need to carry out proper genetic examination."

"Therefore," Lugath said, "unless he's had access to private genotyping equipment he's not yet sure what he's got. Where's the best genotyping center on Mars?"

"Pegasus. Which has the advantage of being far from Zond."

"Assume he sends a sample there. He won't get an answer until about midday tomorrow. Until then he'll be prepared to find his guesses are wrong."

"He's gambled too heavily. But I grant his rationalization is most likely based on the hope of doing down the Centaurs rather than a positive gain for the Bears. Put on Grainger's shoes, will you?"

No, wait—first you must know what Ray did to Housk earlier today."

Thoder summed it up baldly, and Lugath absorbed the words with a succession of intent nods. At length he pantomimed drawing on shoes, and Thoder proceeded.

"What do you know for certain?"

"A man in delirium on Durrith, engineer of the Centaurship *Hippodamia*, has made incoherent references to the voyage he missed by falling ill. Larchman's disease . . . Typically, he'd have talked out his apprehensions about flying the ship with the special compartment in a variant four-space mode. The authorities would have been astute enough to get hold of an expert right away, and the expert would have deduced that the compartment held something small and living, probably a child. Uh—the sick man didn't know what child, but it would take only a little imagination to suggest a rich genetic endowment."

"Did you receive all this at one blow?"

"No, it came in two stages: a preliminary notification that something was odd about the ship on its last trip, and members of the crew should be located and interrogated, beginning with the Martian engineer who stood in for the sick man because the captain and his officers had pre-

viously been regarded as loyal and reliable. Then the news about the special compartment and its likeliest contents followed when the peak of delirium was past and the phase of talking out anxieties set in. Major and multiple revision of previous assumptions, especially the conclusion that the Martian knew nothing of the secret."

"Next step?"

"Hunting down the crew, up to and including the captain." Lugath took off his shoes for a moment. "By the way, I learn that a party from the ship-registration department of the Centaur embassy took over *Hippo* this afternoon. They seem to be searching her. I'm afraid it's a foregone conclusion that they'll take us for Bear agents; I shall have to apply for asylum on Earth. But the loss of one ship in our employ is a small price for a coup of this magnitude."

"If we bring it off," Thoder said sourly. "So the situation stands like this. Kanaiken knows he has a child in whose whereabouts the Centaurs are disproportionately interested; he suspects a key-line genius, but he won't have this confirmed until genotyping is complete, and he'll have to have that done commercially. If he's right, he'll want to avoid rumors getting back here. Pegasus is a good long way away."

"Moreover," Lugath said,

"they tell me there's almost as much pro-Bear sentiment there as there is in Zond. Right?"

"Quite right. When he gets the report, Kanaiken will want to shift the child off Mars before gossip from Pegasus catches up with him. If he loses the baby before receiving the report, and then receives a *false* report indicating that the Centaurs were panicking without adequate reason, he may not take steps to try and retrieve him."

"Slim chance, but our best hope. We shall have to feed him data to indicate a high-ranking Centaur genealogy but with no special talent."

"I can arrange to have such a genotype prepared easily enough. I even have an idea as to how we can engineer the substitution. As to Grainger, though, since your crewman didn't know the child's identity, all he can be flying by is the belief that it's a Centaur child. Can we mislead him into thinking that this is not after all the case?"

Lugath shook his head. "I'll have to think about that," he muttered. "Right now I'm going back on the comweb to see what I can find out at the genotype centers where I know people..."

Thoder sat for a long time in silence. "What a mess!" he said finally. "It's making everything consistent that's the difficulty. Easy enough to mislead Kanaiken."

ken into accepting that the child is high-rank Centaur but not otherwise very notable—provided we can find out where he's having the genotype done and slip in in time to ensure that it's looked after by someone we know."

"Is that not difficult?" I said.

"Cosmos, not especially! Wouldn't you expect the majority of the people who know about the long-term plan to be in just such jobs as staffing a genotype center?"

"Of course," I muttered. "Who's Kanaiken, by the way?"

"Local head of Bear intelligence. And Grainger is his Centaur counterpart. Who more than likely thinks that he's facing a coup by Bears, not by us—Lugath's ship is always carefully sown with misleading clues to direct attention away from the truth, he tells me. So we have to adapt our attempts to fool Kanaiken in such a way as to satisfy him that the Centaurs were panicking over nothing, while making Grainger believe that the Bears' alleged coup misfired. We must lure him into the assumption that—"

Lugath re-entered the room briskly. "Correct on the first try!" he said. "I spoke to Yetta Dryfoos at Pegasus, and she knew at once what I was talking about. Jives called her under his own name about two hours ago to ask how long it

would take to run the test. She told him to get the material on the next available flight and, as Pegasus time is out of phase with ours in Zond, she could return it to him by noon tomorrow—exactly my estimate."

"That's our first stroke of luck today, apart from having Ray turn up," Thoder said. "I'm glad none of my pupils at the College of Serendipity is within earshot. Did she ask what we wanted to interfere for?"

"I thought it better not to tell her, and she agreed," Lugath shrugged. "In fact, what she wants is to be given the misleading material exactly as if it were the sample from Jives, and test it instead; that way, even she won't know what the true sample implies. She said she'd rather remain in the dark about it."

"Ray," Thoder murmured, "isn't your father in Pegasus at the moment? I heard from him a short time ago. He complained that you don't go and visit him any more."

Chapter 17

One of my early instructors in space-drive theory used to make great play with the paradoxical point that it was essentially more trouble to fly from Zond to Pegasus than from Earth to Mars. True, and a source of discouragement when it came to calling on people around the back of the

planet. Our thin air pressure at ground something like 100 on our standard scale of thousands of Earthside altitude-feet—was enough to be a nuisance but inadequate for economic winged flight. Freight transport was mainly by cushion-wheeled trucks such as one could see any day on the streets of Zond, but fast passenger transit was a tougher proposition. All kinds of ideas had been tried. Pure ballistic vehicles were out of the question, and so were ramjets. Oxygen being so scarce on Mars, any airbreathing vehicle had to carry its own oxidant at prohibitive cost, the same applying to rocket oxidants if the engines were used for more than the shortest possible part of the trip. Attempts to exploit the energy available from free radicals—lacking an ozone layer as we did, sunlight generated a lot of these—had proved abortive, and the eventual semi-solution was a kind of re-entry vehicle boosted to sub-orbital height and then skimmed in a series of hops to the destination with variable aspect wings. They were uncomfortable, hence unpopular, and I'd never seen one with a full complement of passengers.

I didn't this time. But as I was stowing my gear in the elastic net of the baggage-sling over my seat, I discovered that this particular ship was overcrowded.

It contained, to my dismay,

none other than Major Housk.

What in the galaxy was he doing here? I was instantly ready to slip away and take a later flight, even if it meant Jives wouldn't get his report from Pegasus at the time promised; better to risk his unfounded suspicions of interference than hit to Housk that I was deeper involved—

Too late. He'd spotted me, and was approaching with determined strides. His face was flushed and his pupils dilated, facts that reinforced my dismay, for they indicated he'd taken one of the Centaur stimulants, most likely one of the high-order amphetamine derivatives.

I decided to salve what initiative I could and launch a frontal attack. "Not busted to the ranks yet?" I said in my most insulting voice, forestalling his own first words.

The gibe went home, but he didn't rise to it. "Going to Pegasus!" he grunted, pointing at the labels on my bags.

"If my father weren't expecting me to be on this flight," I said, "I'd call the police and lay an information against you for what you did to me the other night."

He gave a harsh laugh. "What I did to you? You're a fool, aren't you? Basing an accusation on something I said while you were nerve-whipping me would be futile. Anyway, don't you Martians dislike the police

here because they're an Earthside institution?"

Which was penetratingly accurate; I was reminded of Peter and Lilith referring to the same point. But I felt I should continue trying to rile him—it was safe to do so, since it was consistent with the reaction of a merely angry man.

"I presume someone found you under the Old Temple," I muttered. "A shame. I hoped it would be the smell of your body rotting which finally attracted attention."

"I was found by someone in no position to take action against me," he snapped. "So your hope of seeing me busted in rank has gone phut, hear me? Instead I expect to come out of this with a commendation or two!"

I added another to the list of distinctions one could make between Centaur and Bear culture: Centaurs were shame-oriented and didn't basically care what they did provided they could do it without others finding out and their social standing being undermined, whereas Bears constituted a guilt-culture and carried their own moral standards around in their consciences.

What counted now, though, was that he sounded triumphant. I must try and get him to boast further, cluing me in on the way he thought he'd turned the tables. I was casting around for another line of attack when the takeoff

warning sounded and I lost my chance, for with a final scowl he obeyed the warning like a good Centaur and turned to resume his own seat up front.

What could have made him so cocky? I wrestled with that problem all the way to Pegasus. In the end I resolved that I had better watch him after landing and try to see where he was headed.

He was too alert to give me the opportunity, though, and deliberately hung about until I could not convincingly miss any more cabs. I sighed and called one, instructing it to start off in a direction consistent with my statement that my father was expecting me. My last sight of Housk suggested that he was making for a public comweb—to verify that my father actually lived here, most probably.

I had no intention of going straight to my father's lodgings. Tucked in an inner pocket I was carrying a small sample of tissue: not artificial, which would have been both extremely expensive and too likely to be faulty, but modified to convey exactly the idea Thoder had mentioned—that the donor was from a high-ranking Centaur bloodline but had inherited no truly remarkable combination of genes.

That sample I had to deliver as soon as possible to the woman Lugath had contacted, Yetta Dryfoos. She was on the staff of the Pegasus maternity clinic—as

everywhere, genotyping and maternity went together on Mars. Only Centaurs carried the planning of their descendants to such lengths, but it was a human habit for parents to wonder about what they were going to have to bring up.

I gave the cab the appropriate revised instructions.

When I was shown into her glass-ceilinged office, the cleanest, lightest and most spacious room I'd seen on Mars for a long time, I stopped dead. She was so much of a rarity that since I'd been travelling to other worlds I'd almost convinced myself women like her didn't exist, and my youthful impression that they did was due to lack of adult discrimination.

She was both multi-generation Martian, and beautiful.

She rose to greet me, revealing that she stood about six-ten. Black straight hair hung to her shoulders, framing a face longer than oval, with a broad forehead, high cheekbones, a firm, slightly thin-lipped mouth. Her complexion was a warm copper-brown. She wore a loose coverall of satiny white fabric that tended to mask the curves of her body, but it was clear nonetheless that she had the true proportions of her height. Like me, virtually all Martians were lean, and some would say lanky, but she was slender, a term that came belatedly to

mind because so few of our women deserved it.

"Miss Dryfoos?" I said, and found I was laying an imperceptible private stress on the former word.

She smiled, showing magnificent white teeth. "You've made excellent time! My uncle warned me that your—ah—your package might not be ready in time for you to catch so early a flight."

"Your uncle?"

"Why, yes—your former teacher, I understand."

I shook my head in bewilderment. "I thought you were a friend of Captain Lugath's. I didn't know you were kin to Thoder."

"The captain may not know, either. My uncle is discreet about his relatives, because by no means all of us have led such retiring lives."

I was going to have to investigate Thoder's family. I was coming around to the idea that they must exercise enormous influence in Martian affairs. And come to think of it, why not? Mars's sparse population meant that one outstanding heredity-line would literally stand out more than on a crowded Earth-type world, just as we spoke of a mountain and meant hills a few hundred feet high, rare on Mars.

Perhaps Thoder's family reflected in little what they were hoping to do with the Centaur-Martian line represented by his

recently born great-grandson—

"What shall I do with the sample Jives sent?" She had opened a drawer in a wall-hung cabinet.

"Destroy it," I said promptly. "Run your tests on this one instead." I handed her the faked sample, which she slid into the drawer before carrying the real one to a disposal chute next to the door.

"Good," she said, dusting her hands. "Now it won't be a complete deception; Jives will get his report in exactly the same terms as he'd have got anyway. Thank you. Without knowing what this is all about, but having great respect for my uncle, I'm sure you've done an important service."

Was that going to be all? Apparently, for she was returning to her desk, and asking: "Can you find your own way out?"

Too much was at stake to waste time in casual chat, yet I felt a stab of disappointment. Having chanced on a lovely woman like this, at the very least I wanted to *look* at her!

A fact that she recognized with disconcerting candor. For she gave me a twinkling smile.

"Forgive me saying this, won't you? But the only Martian men who ever come in this room as strangers, then walk out again without — ah — hovering a little, are uninterested in women generally. I appreciate it. It's very flattering. But I have a hell of

a lot of time to make up if I'm going to meet the deadline I promised Jives without realizing anything odd was going on."

I gave an embarrassed grin and went out.

The corridors and hallways of the building were empty. The Martian staff, happy in this area pressurized to 10, were of course in the minority; most of the people who worked here must be on the maternity side behind airlocks in a thick clammy Earth-side atmosphere. Damn this necessity which still tied us to Earth like an umbilical cord!

I saw no one else at all while I was leaving. Not even the young man who'd shown me into Yetta Dryfoos's presence (and *that* was a better way of putting it than simply "into her office").

On the path connecting the building to the sidewalks of the town, I met a man with the general air of a husband coming to call on his wife in the pressurized maternity clinic, carrying sand flowers and a box of apples; then two porters, Earthside immigrants, humping cases of medical supplies with alarming ease in the low gravity. I walked absently for a considerable distance, my mind occupied with a picture of Yetta Dryfoos, until it occurred to me that I ought to work out where I was going.

Unlike Zond, a canal-town spreading along the floor of a rift valley for the sake of the na-

tural enclosure it formed, Pegasus was a crater-town, bowl-shaped, with its main thoroughfares arranged like a Shield of David. I had just calculated that if I walked to my father's lodgings I ought to arrive about in time for the midday meal, when I saw the cab go past on the dusty street outside.

Its passenger was a man I'd have recognized anywhere. And there was only one place in the direction he was heading where he was likely to be bound for.

I spun around and began to race after him with all the speed my loping Martian gait could afford.

Of course, the cab had dropped him and gone long before I reached the entrance of the genotype center again. I dashed into the hallway, almost bowling over an elderly woman carrying a rack of solid gene-models, and stormed towards the office I'd left a few minutes before.

I opened its door silently, silently, blessing the standard of Martian honor which made even the provision of locks on doors superfluous, for certainly Housk would have locked intruders out if he could. There he was, levelling his beloved nerve-whip at Yetta, rasping orders to her that she should get out and give him the tissue-sample she'd received from Jives.

So the Centaurs knew far more about what was going on than

Thoder had imagined. But there was no time to worry about that. I had to act before the rounding of Yetta's eyes, their involuntary shift of focus, gave me away.

I managed it. I had to be brutal, but I was weak compared to anyone raised on a one-gee planet. I clamped my hand over Housk's eyes and hauled him backwards to stumble on my outstretched leg. I don't think he had been more surprised even when I took the whip away from him in the room under the Old Temple. He yelled and crashed to the floor with a thump, and Yetta dodged around her desk to snatch at his whip. Somehow we twisted it loose from his frantic grasp, and she leapt back out of his reach with movements as fluid and graceful as a dance.

"Thank you," she said when she had recovered her normal calm. "And now can you tell me who the hell he *is*?"

Chapter 18

It would have been comical, if it hadn't been so pathetic, to watch Housk's hope of emerging from this tangle evaporate from his face. It carried away with it all his color, leaving him pasty-pale, and all the spurious bravado lent by the stimulants he'd taken.

But there was no time to explain the background to Yetta. The crash with which he had slumped to the floor had resound-

ed through this entire building. The first person to come inquiring was the elderly woman I'd almost bumped into as I rushed to the rescue, but she was joined within another few seconds by half a dozen startled members of the staff, half of them Earth-siders.

Among them was an authoritative man of late middle age, hair a shock of iron-grey, who instantly assumed charge of the nerve-whip, a Martian, fortunately.

Lacking guidance, the only thing Yetta could do was pretend ignorance. "Thank you, Dr. Snell," she said. "I think the man must be crazy. He came charging in here without warning, drew his whip, and ordered me to give him the contents of the tissue-sample cupboard. If I hadn't been saved by Mr. Mallin—"

"And what brought you here?" Snell inquired of me.

"I'm from Zond, where Yetta's uncle lives," I said. "I'm in Pagasus to visit my father, and I was asked to bring her a message while I was here."

"Lucky you turned up." Snell gestured to his colleagues. "Well, better get him on his feet and put him somewhere safe until the police arrive."

"It's all lies!" Housk blasted. "You damned Martians are born lying! Mallin knows perfectly well who I am and why I'm here—

why don't you ask him about the child he kidnapped?"

"Child? What child?" Snell blinked.

"Oh!" Yetta chimed in loudly. "Maybe that would explain his behavior. Are you suffering from the delusion that he kidnapped your child? Did you come here to look for it?" She winked enormously at Snell, intending that Housk should see it.

"No, you can't get away with that," Housk thundered. "Are you in charge here? If you are, look through that cupboard and you'll find a Centaur tissue-sample—"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Snell shrugged. "As a matter of fact, we usually have two or three hundred Centaur tissue-samples—"

"I mean the one that was sent to you by a man called Jives!"

"Doctor, we're on the fringe of a paranoid fantasy, I think," Yetta murmured. "I have such a sample, but Jives is a Bear citizen, I believe—he has a Bear accent, anyway!"

Housk must have read Snell's agreement with the suggestion from his expression. All at once he seemed to slump. He spoke again in a changed voice: thick, slow, hopeless.

"Lies, nothing but lies from state to finish. This is a planet of maniacs living in a dream. I should have known when we found out about the Old Temple."

"What was that?" I said. I couldn't help myself.

He recovered a part of his poise and sneered at me. "Oh, yes—you know about the Temple, don't you? Or you think you do! You whipped me unconscious and left me there, didn't you? And if Raglan hadn't found me and told me about Jives, you'd have got away with it. But you're not going to, I swear you're not!"

Snell looked at me. I shook my head, and after a second of private debate he decided to take my word over that of a Centaur who'd broken in and threatened Yetta with his whip. He motioned that Housk should be led away.

"Not so fast!" Housk freed himself with a jerk of both arms and took the pace needed to confront me. "Dirty Martian scum—shall I tell you about your precious Temple? We know more about it than you do! Why, we've used that room where you whipped me for years and years and years, and nobody but us ever goes there. Blockhead! How many times have you stood gaping at those famous fifteen artifacts, and never once bothered to ask what they're doing in a display case instead of being analyzed and studied and replicas being put on show instead of the real thing?"

The Earthsiders in the room exchanged worried glances, but this was something any Martian would want to know about.

"Fakes!" Housk crowed. "That's what they are—fakes, planted to make people believe in aboriginal Martians! We've known the truth for years. Who but stupid Martians would have fallen for a simple hoax? If there were ever *real* Martians, or if there were visitors from the stars who stopped over on Mars, we wanted to know about them, so we investigated, and we found the stones were dressed with tools having metric-system dimensions. *Men* built your stinking temple!" He was almost frothing, so eager was he to get back somehow at the Martians who'd frustrated his last desperate hope of saving his reputation before his superiors found out how he'd bungled his responsibilities.

It was a fair bet that this man Raglan, who'd discovered him lying unconscious when bringing a report on Jives, must be a Centaur agent using the temple room as a mail-drop—precisely as I'd guessed. His interest in Jives could be due to nothing more remarkable than that the Centaurs suspected him, as Thoder did, of being a Bear agent. In view of the sensitive location of the Old System between the two blocs, each side would want to watch the other closely.

It followed with high probability that Housk had told no one else of his new data. He'd seized on the chance to steal the tissue-sample and get it to his

chief, Grainger, as insurance against the consequences of letting himself be overpowered and questioned by me. From this, further implications fanned out. I didn't bother tracing them all, but seized on the first that offered to be helpful.

I said, "I thought all Centaurs knew about Plato."

"What?" Sensing that his bombshell wasn't working, he peered up at me.

"Never heard of a 'noble lie'?" Inwardly I was shaking; what he said about the Temple could be—almost certainly was—correct, and the most cherished of my surviving childhood illusions was blowing away like sand before the wind. But I wasn't going to let a mere Centaur see that!

"You're the child of a four-space drive, *little man*," I said. "But my ancestors, *our* ancestors, *our Martian* ancestors, were quite prepared to go to the stars the hard way if they had to, in multi-generation ships like arks, dying billions of miles from home in the hope that their children's children would visit the stars! Don't you think it was a welcome reminder that the idea wasn't absurd, to have a big, mysterious, inexplicable building as concrete evidence, and strange incomprehensible things on display inside it?"

I looked at Yetta, and her eyes were shining. Fantastic. Even as I spoke, I had the sensation that

what I was saying was true in some sense larger than ordinary facts—in the sense in which a myth is true.

"And," I said cruelly, "you fooled yourselves. Can you think of a worse place to use as a torture-chamber for a Martian than the very symbol of his most beloved traditions?"

He got that, all right. It must have seemed to him that I'd drawn strength from the surroundings of the Temple and resisted the worst he could do to me during his interrogation, whereas he'd succumbed at once when the tables were turned. Being shown so grossly weak by comparison with one of us despised Martians wrecked the last vestige of his self-control and he was actually blubbering when he was taken away.

I took advantage of the interruption to ask Yetta softly how many of these people were trustworthy, and she told me that if I could convince Snell I could rely on him to get the rest of the staff to keep quite, at least for a time. I took a detour into extended time to review the possibilities, and settled for a set of half-truths.

I told him enough to let him guess at a great deal more and add the whole up to an impressive total. I said I was back from a trip into Centaur space which had revealed the operations of Housk and his companions in a

new light; they were trying to undo the prevalent pro-Bear sympathies of Earthsiders on Mars; I was ignorant of his purpose in asking for the tissue-sample, but it was probably an anti-Bear plot, and anyway what business did Centaurs or Bears have conducting their squabbles on Mars?

The final point went deep in his mind, and we had no trouble persuading him to ensure that the news went no further. He asked what I wanted to do with Housk—what *I* wanted! I could scarcely tell him, but it seemed safest to put him into police custody and let his Embassy reclaim him if and when they wanted to. Once his superiors learned what he'd been up to, especially when they learned that he had withheld Raglan's report instead of relaying it, he would be shipped home so fast he'd burn up from the friction.

Having got rid of Snell, I turned to Yetta. There was a pause.

"Did you—did you know about the Old Temple?" she said finally.

I shook my head.

"Then . . ."

"I made it up," I said savagely. "But I'm damned if I was going to let him get away with it!"

"You made it up." She turned the words over in imagination, and went on, "In that case, I think I rather like you. It was

exactly what everyone needed to hear, especially myself. I don't know what in the world my uncle is getting up to at the moment, and I was so reluctant to think that I might be involved that I almost turned down Lugath's request to accept the tissue-sample you brought. I'd have said it was an insult to Martian integrity to cheat an offworlder by giving false information. But now—well, what has this man Jives done?"

"Kidnapped one of your relatives," I said, and in the same moment suddenly saw that Thoder had made a mistake.

Thoder! I wouldn't have believed it possible! But years of living his quiet, inconspicuous existence as a teacher, cut off even from his influential kinfolk, must have conditioned him into the habit of secrecy and non-involvement with public institutions.

"What?"

"Kidnapped one of your relatives!" It was an inspiration that had come to me. Why was Thoder wasting his time in this elaborate pattern of deceit, this absurd racing against time with only the resources available through friendship and shared secret knowledge? "What do you know about a girl called Shilene?"

Yetta's face hardened momentarily. The fleeting expression told me I was right. I seemed to have been able to step outside my own environment for the first

time, make as clear an assessment of Martian society as I could of Bear or Centaur.

Our standards of honorable behavior, instanced by my expressing obligation to Peter and Lilith for saving my life, by the fact that we didn't lock doors against fellow-Martians, weren't isolated in our culture any more than they had ever been. They were associated to form a coherent pattern, exemplified by my refusal to go on monumental sprees when I was at home, though I often did so elsewhere, and equally by my willingness to have casual affairs with Bear girls I didn't intend for a moment to marry, while reserving at the back of my mind a long-term vision of marrying on Mars. A double standard of classic quality! In short, our Martian culture was a stock puritanical pioneer one, with the same strengths and weaknesses as Puritan New England in the seventeenth century.

My flash of insight was confirmed by Yetta's reply to my question: "Shilene? How did you hear of her? We're not exactly proud of that branch of our family, you know!"

"You damned well ought to be," I said. "I've just learned that I'm not willing to sacrifice my Martian illusions that make me comfortable, while she must have sacrificed a hell of a lot more—almost as much as Thoder."

I was about to demand a comweb so I could contact Thoder and explain his mistake before we lost our chance to do more than salvage the situation—to turn it, indeed, into a spectacular triumph over both Bears and Centaurs. Then something Housk had said clicked in my mind. This unknown Raglan had told him about Jives and the delivery of the tissue-sample to this genotype center, half around the planet from Zond. The only way such information could have leaked out was if the Centaurs were able to tap comwebs. Safer, then, to go back to Zond.

"Get out that tissue-sample I brought," I said to Yetta, "Don't argue. Jives won't need a test run on it by the time we've finished with him. Collect the absolute minimum of belongings and come with me."

"But you must explain!" she said, looking vaguely frightened.

"Let your uncle explain," I snapped. "Come on—move!"

Chapter 19

"Thoder! Thoder!"

I strode into the house shouting at the top of my lungs. Behind me Yetta stood uncertainly, eying the furniture and decorations.

A noise came from the room on my left. I swung around and reached for the handle to open its door. It opened fractionally soon-

er, and there was—not Thoder, but Lugath.

"Mallin!" he barked, and would have gone on but that he glanced past me and recognized Yetta. His air had been of mere tiredness and harassment when he emerged; abruptly it changed to fury.

"Cosmos! What are you doing here? Have you brought that genotype for Jives? There'll be hell to pay if he doesn't get it as promised."

"He's not getting it," she said.

"What?" Lugath's face went grey. "But—"

"A Centaur who seems to be some kind of spy turned up and demanded that I give him the tissue-sample," Yetta sighed. "Beyond this, you'll have to ask Ray."

Lugath rounded on me. "Housk?" he breathed, scarcely crediting his own suspicion.

"Yes, Housk. he didn't get away with it—I interfered. But it doesn't make a sliver of a difference."

"Are you crazy?" Lugath's voice peaked towards frenzy. "Did you cover up?"

"We handed him over to the Pegasus police, and I guess he'll get back to their Embassy some time."

"Oh, no." Lugath put both hands to his head. "What a brilliant idea. That's all we need. I suppose lots and lots of people in Pegasus have been told all

about it, too!"

"Well, it was hard to keep quiet when six or seven people came to see what the trouble was and found Housk on the floor and Yetta standing over him with a nerve-whip."

Lugath felt wordlessly for support, and leaned heavily on the nearest wall. "So that's it," he said emptily. "It's gone for nothing, and there won't be another chance like it for generations."

"Wrong," I said. "It's the best thing that could possibly have happened, because it let some daylight into the whole confused business."

"You must be out of your mind," Lugath said. "When Jives doesn't get the tissue sample, and makes inquiries, and hears about this intrusive Centaur, he'll realize—"

"Hold on! You're still skulking around in your maze of secrecy, Lugath, and the time for that is over. This is Mars, remember? Not Leovang or Durirth or anywhere else, but Mars!"

I looked in vain for a sign of comprehension from him, but too many years spent among Centaurs, passing as one himself, had put up the shutters around his mind. Anyhow, it wasn't Lugath I wanted to convince of my inspiration, but Thoder.

"Where is Thoder?" I demanded.

"Where do you think he is?" Lugath responded wearily.

"At the College of Serendipity?"

"Of course. He works there, so he has every right to be at the place, and our best estimate of the whereabouts of the baby is that he's in Jives's possession, and Jives is ostensibly a student at the college."

"Yetta! Go look for a cab with cross-country wheels. We have to get about five miles out of town, and quickly!"

"Mallin, you'll make things ten times worse if you go blasting in with all jets. All it would take is one unaccountable action to—"

"For pity's sake!" I exploded. I took from my pocket the faked tissue-sample which had proved so unnecessary and waved it under Lugath's nose. "There are three things which are extraordinary about that baby, not two! Sure he's Centaur, and sure he's a potential prodigy—but on top of that he's also part-Martian, and if you don't see what's important about that I'm damned certain Thoder will!"

"Cab coming," Yetta reported from the doorway.

The route from here to the College of Serendipity was along the hairpinned road near Grand Canal Apartments. It was incredibly frustrating to have to cover five times the straight-line distance simply because we had to reach mainsurface from the bottom of the canal. I sat tensely

forward on my seat, glowering through the dust which the vehicle kicked up.

"Hell," I muttered, "I could get up this slope faster on foot!"

Yetta didn't answer directly. When we had rounded another bend, though, she said, "Ray, are you sure you know what you're doing? Lugath seemed terribly—"

"Lugath is trapped in a mental maze, the same as I was," I said. "He's spent far too long pretending he's a Centaur."

"Even so—"

"Yetta, please! No, I'm not sure I know what I'm doing, only ninety per cent convinced of the idea. But between here and the place we're going I think I can take care of the other ten per cent—if you'll let me concentrate."

"I'm sorry." She pressed her lips together and sat back.

Right. Now I had the broad outlines of the story I wanted to make Thoder accept, so—

The cab reached mainsurface level and swung past the penthouse of Grand Canal Apartments, and at that very instant a figure emerged from the doorway. Masked, muffled in warm outdoor clothing, even so nothing could have prevented me from recognizing the diminutive stature of Lilith Choy, nor her from recognizing me hunched forward as I was close to the windshield of the cab and staring out.

She was standing stock still as

we passed her. Glancing back, I saw with a heart-dropping pang that she had immediately started to re-enter the apartment.

In this direction, there was one possible destination only, the college. The road led nowhere else. Indeed, it was a mere track. Did they know of a link between me and Thoder, or between me and Jives? It wasn't yet time for the delivery of the promised genotype report, but even so . . .

To hell with it. I strained my eyes to see whether there was another vehicle following us, but I saw none, and anyhow it would have meant nothing if I had done—the college was popular with the most improbably people, not only Bears.

I'd never actually seen the place. It was about as weird as I'd imagined before I learned that Thoder was lecturing at it; since then, my mental picture had been toned down to comparative respectability.

Actually, it was almost funny. Like most isolated Martian structures, it consisted in a series of domes connected by pressurized walkways, but this underlying conventionality was completely obscured by the decorations. They began with a larger-than-life group of statues—inevitably, Apprehension, Hope and Certainty, the classic Bear symbols—in gilded ugliness above the main gate from the road. They continued in a welter of phantasmas-

goric allusions; luck-symbols from every planet where such a concept was recognized loomed on all sides. One dome was painted as a game-board, another as a deck of cards; a lightning-conductor jutted up from another still, as absurd as the bit of red thread sometimes tied around a baby's wrist on Earth, to strengthen the joint and protect against rheumatism, for there had never been a thunderstorm on Mars!

Some other time I'd look over this grand array of nonsense and have myself a good laugh. Right now, I was in a hurry. The cab halted at the main entrance of the college. I took Yetta's hand and led her at a dead run inside the building.

The college had the noisy silence characteristic of every educational institution I'd ever been in, orthodox or crank, composed of the resonance of many voices distant along echoing passageways. There was no one in sight. Swallowing hard to adjust to the pressure here—kept up to four for the benefit of the Bear majority among the students—we hastened along the entrance corridor until we came to a sort of assembly hall from which at least six others diverged.

"Hell! Which way?" I snapped.

Yetta pointed. "There's a bulletin board!"

I strode over to it. Scanning the details posted for the students, I found such choice chunks of

crankery as *Harmony II, Adjustment to Planetary Rhythms*, and *Open Lecture: The Influence of Temperature and Humidity on Cross-Complex Luck Nexi*, interspersed with sensible-sounding subjects such as probability in its application to card-games.

Ah! *Life-Adjustment*, a course of six lectures by Professor (Emeritus) Thoder. I ran a finger down the table of dates and times, located today, and found that the lecture was being given in the Central Demonstration Hall.

I hunted everywhere for signs, or a plan of the college. Finding none, I called to Yetta.

"We'll just have to hope that luck is freely available here! Let's try the biggest corridor first."

She nodded and came towards me. A door leading on to the hall opened abruptly with a creak of complaint, and a woman peered out.

She looked like a child's comic doll. She stood about as high as Yetta's elbow, but added to this with the help of an immense coiffure, stacked and stacked in several layers each of a different color: white, yellow, brownish-red, brown and black. Cosmetics made her face an ageless mask, which might have belonged to a child pretending to be an adult or an elderly woman persuading herself she was still young. Purple-irised eyes like holes in the mask fixed us.

"According to Hucker," she said in a voice that squeaked almost as agonizingly as the door, "you've just set yourself back at least a hundred turns on the spiral of the Greatest Game."

"What?" I blinked foolishly at her, decided that her aid was better than nothing, and pursued the important subject. "Look, where's the Demonstration Hall, where Professor Thoder is lecturing?"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly let you go in there after what you just said," she answered with a head-shake so violent I thought it would dislodge her piled-up hair. "You did say, didn't you, that luck was 'freely available'? One mustn't even think this. Please go before your auras disturb the general harmony of the institution."

She advanced on me, waving both arms as though shooing away an annoying small animal.

"Where's the Demonstration Hall?" I repeated.

"Go away. Go away. Who let you in, anyhow? We always have to screen our disciples most thoroughly, and as a result this is a focus of universal harmonies unparalleled in the galaxy. Coming in here in your state of mind is like—like shovelling sand into a watch!"

"Have you taken any of Thoder's lectures?"

"What? Goodness, no. He teaches only the visiting students,

not any of the resident staff."

"I thought not. Thoder would knock that nonsense out of you fast enough. But since he'd not here I'll have to do." I bunched my fist and waved it under her nose. "Do you tell me where to find him, or shall I kick you in the aura?"

"Help," she said in a thin voice, and looked appealingly at Yetta.

Yetta folded both arms on her handsome bosom and looked down with tall Martian scorn. She said, "What happens if we find it by good old trial and error, hmmm?"

Clever girl! I should have thought of that. The woman with the dreadful hair uttered a sigh of horror, and I thought she was going to give in, but at that moment a gong chimed softly, and there was a redoubling of the background noise, the end-of-class explosion common to any school.

"Professor Thoder will pass us on his way out," she said. "And when he gets here, I'll give him a piece of my mind."

"Have you any to spare, really?" Yetta said with superbly insulting sweetness. I forgot everything else, though. Craning on tip-toe over the heads of the students who now washed down the corridors from all directions, I tried to spot Thoder—yes, there he was, looking tired and dispirited.

In the instant he saw me, I took a deep breath. He wasn't going to like my doing this, but I could save valuable time by making him build on a *fait accompli* rather than persuading him to fall in with my plan instead of his.

"Thoder!" I shouted, for everyone to hear. "Your great-grandson is here! It's definite now—it *is* him!"

He looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. Dismay and alarm crossed his face, and then he came charging towards me, ordering students out of his way, to seize my arm and demand in a frantic whisper the same thing Lugath had asked, was I out of my mind?

"No," I said. "In it, for the first time in my whole life. Where can we go to talk quietly?"

Chapter 20

As I laid bare the flaw in Thoder's original assumptions, I could feel all around us the rapid percolation of what I'd shouted in the hall. It would be picked up and relayed in puzzled tones by Thoder's own students, who might think they knew him and were surprised to discover he had relatives; it would travel likewise for its own sake—an unexpected event intruding—among those who didn't know him: "Some crazy Martian came shouting along the corridor, something about Prof. Thoder's grandson,

or something, I think . . ."

Being Thoder, the old man disciplined himself into listening. That, though, didn't last long. So swiftly that I was taken aback, he saw through my own confused explanations to the heart of the matter.

"Let me confirm that I've understood properly," he requested. "You are saying that the need for secrecy and elaborate cover stories ceased the moment we successfully landed the baby on Mars. We should according to you then have taken the fuel from both Bear and Centaur jets by loudly advertising what we'd done.

"The published version of events would involve three superficially convincing falsehoods. The first: that you, an ex-pupil of my own, turned space-engineer, had been enlisted in order to try and forestall a Bear coup. The second: that such a coup existed, that Lugath's ship was acting for Bears rather than for the Old System espionage network—as witness the misleading clues which the Centaurs will have found when they inspected it—and that his action in reporting two Bear agents to the Centaur authorities was a cover designed to make those authorities think he was perfectly loyal. And the third: that I have disowned my granddaughter Shilene." His eyes were wide with sadness, but none of it colored his voice.

"You would rely for the success and public acceptance of this story on three sociological assumptions. As regards the Bears, you feel that they would be content to withdraw from their involvement. It would be a blow to pro-Bear sentiment in this system if they claimed that they in fact did plan to kidnap the baby, but conversely it would suit them well to have the Centaurs believe their espionage was so brilliant they knew about the child; you'd expect them to issue a formal disclaimer of involvement couched in neutral terms that the Centaurs would disregard. As far as the Centaurs themselves are concerned, they will find it sufficient of a blow to have news of the Tyrant Presumptive's connection with a—a courtesan noised abroad. In the glare of such publicity, and moreover in the wake of the scandal which will follow Housk's ill-judged behavior, they'll be compelled to swallow the existing situation without making further attempts to trace the child. Tyrant Basil will not wish to show excessive interest in an illegitimate grandson, for fear this might be interpreted as a gesture towards recognizing him as a lineal successor, and you need only look at their obsession with heraldry to see how this would disrupt their standard procedures. Moreover, the same habit will make it seem entirely logical to

them that I, as an enraged grandparent, took steps to reclaim my descendant from the care of a girl whose life had been—ah—morally most irregular."

Still he could have been analyzing an abstract problem.

"And the third support on which you rest your proposals is the way in which Yetta here reacted when you mentioned Shilene." His eyes flickered briefly to Yetta; she was sitting still as stone.

"You're absolutely right, Ray. Our society on Mars is a puritanical one. One doesn't think of that as being a term of praise, yet in some senses it is. How could our forefathers have envisaged the kind of rigid independent culture they wanted to develop here, as a foil and contrast to Earthside laxity and uniformity, had there not been such unbreakable standards as a puritan thought-pattern implies? Merely because we were overtaken by events, and our designed function was made obsolete by starflight, hasn't invalidated this underlying strictness. Let it only be said that I *am* an enraged grandparent, and every proud Martian will rally to my side against Bears, Centaurs and Earthsiders alike. It will be a feather in their caps as well as mine to know that a child of Martian heredity has been reclaimed to the planet of his ancestors!"

Now at last his tone did change, and rose with excitement as he clapped me on the shoulder. "Ray, I've had pupils I thought were better than you—more attentive, more interested—but this I swear, I never hoped to be taught by any of them! And you've shown me how blind I was, thanks to my own traditions."

Yetta leaned forward. "So what are you going to do?"

"Go find the child with maximum publicity!" Thoder exclaimed, and started for the door. "We believe him to be somewhere in this college, most likely in Jive's quarters, where the crying of a child would be nothing extraordinarily. A great many young Bear couples—often graduate students—come back here to take a short course when their children are born, thinking that luck is something that can be soaked out of the air and absorbed into the babies' bones!"

"Is this idea deliberately encouraged?" I asked, thinking of the weird woman with the polychrome hair who'd challenged us.

"Of course—it maximizes the contrast between Bear and Centaur to have one society rigidly pre-planned, the other cheerfully accepting randomness as a major factor in life."

As we hurried down the long walkways linking the main col-

lege building to the smaller one where the Bear students were housed, I was so relieved I'd almost turned off my mind. I glanced at the wall-decorations, seeing how they repeated the same theme as was represented on the exterior of the domes: games of chance, lucky and unlucky symbols. Some of them were of curious archeological interest, such as the picture of a room containing a broken mirror, vases of flowers which Earth-siders traditionally considered of ill-omen, bunches of peacock's feathers, spilled salt and crossed cutlery lying on a table—even, so help me, an umbrella which had been opened inside the house. I wondered if an umbrella had ever been brought to Mars; I'd never seen one until I landed for the first time of Charigol in a rainstorm.

We made no attempt either to attract or avoid attention, and a good many people saw us pass, mostly Bear students dispersing to their rooms in the same dome as Jives. My closing-down mind ignored them.

It was only the chance of my walking more quickly than the elderly Thoder, thanks to which I reached the junction of three passageways and paused with a glance in either direction while waiting for him to catch up with me, that I spotted him. It was only a glimpse as he dodged out of sight, but it snapped me back into

full relationship with the present.

I gasped. Yetta, who had been walking more slowly than I out of politeness towards Thoder, closed the gap between us and demanded to know what was wrong.

I said, "I just saw Peter Nizam! What can he be doing here?" And answered my own question in the same breath? "Cosmos! Of course, Lilith Choy recognized me in the cab on the way here."

Thoder paled. "But that's not the way to Jives's room!" he rapped. He waved down the passage opposite to that in which I'd seen Peter, and broke into a stumbling run.

It was abundantly clear, the moment we thrust open the door of Jives's quarters, that Peter had put two and two together and come to warn Jives to make himself scarce. There was no one here, but there had been. The door of a closet swung ajar, and there was the smell of a wet baby within it.

"One of these days," Yetta said very softly, "I'm going to tell what I think of people who will treat a child as a kind of parcel-trade-goods, to be swapped around from hand to hand. And that includes you, uncle."

"Which way could they have gone?" I demanded. "Is there an exit the way Nizam went?"

"No, but you can go through another dome and take a passage back to the entrance!"

"Try and cut them off!" Yetta

said. I nodded and ran from the room.

This time, the people I encountered were sufficiently intrigued to come after me—not at my speed, but in a gaggle of curiosity. I stormed into the same hallway where I'd encountered the woman with the incredible hair, and there she was again, holding forth to a group of middle-aged students on the dreadful intrusion she'd witnessed. Seeing me, she broke off with her hand to her mouth.

"Did Jives come this way?" I snapped at her. She didn't answer, but moaned and swayed with eyes closed, doubtless imagining her private castle of luck collapsing as in an earthquake.

I would learn nothing from the astonished and dismayed students, I could be sure of that. I dashed to the window alongside the main entrance, peering out to see if there was anyone resembling either Jives or Peter.

And there was! A short distance away, not having suckled up as a cab would have done to connect directly with the higher pressure of the building, stood a private car, something very rare on Mars. Racing towards it were two men. One looked like Peter, the other burdened with an oblong bundle which I recognized as a pressurized baby-carrier—was Jives.

I went into extended time faster than I'd ever managed it before, and went so deep that my

mask felt heavy as lead when I forced it over my face. Even my body felt sluggish, as I'm told it does in water on an Earthlike world; Martian to the marrow of my bones, I'd never attempted to swim. Nonetheless I managed to get through the door and outside, head ringing from the sudden rise in my oxygen intake as I clumsily mis-adjusted the cylinder feeding my mask.

Though I couldn't see through the car's windows, I was sure Lilith must be on board, waiting for the split-second after her companions' arrival to drive off at high speed. The mere use of extended time would never have brought me up to them before that; it took another chance factor operating in my favor to delay them. A car designed for Mars work—or a truck, or anything—couldn't carry a building-sized airlock or the air-supply needed to refill it each time it cycled. The lock, therefore, consisted in a man-sized compartment with flush sliding doors, from which the air was driven by inflated plastic sheets, contouring themselves to the occupant as the two doors cycled. I'd complained of the way all Mars vehicles seemed to be scaled to Earthside midgets. For once I was grateful that this was so.

The bulk of the baby-carrier meant that the lock had to be operated three times, not twice;

that Nizam had to go in first, wait to receive the baby inside the lock, and then make way for Jives.

I caught up just as the lock was opening for the baby, shouting. Jives heard me despite the bad sound-conduction of this natural exterior air, turned and saw me racing towards him, stood for a long second in petrified horror, and took to his heels, baby and all.

My detour into extended time had to stop here; I wasn't capable of using oxygen at the rate needed to support such frantic double-speed activity, and I'd got this far on the "second wind" of a long-distance runner. Nonetheless my heart gave an exultant bound. Jives might be able to get away from me briefly, using his high-gravity musculature, but I could wear him down with my loping Martian strides and drive him into soft patches of sand where he would flounder helplessly while I—big-footed, accustomed to the conditions—would have the superiority of a camel over a horse in an Earthside desert.

That became clear to him too after only a short distance. Thinking he'd outpaced me, he paused and glanced back, and saw me still coming on, running lightly and easily where he was struggling.

Dismay showed plainly on the part of his face not covered by

his mask; his windchapped forehead ridged in a frown of alarm. Suddenly he bent to set down the baby-carrier, and I thought he was going to surrender, for he didn't simply let it fall and abandon it, but stayed leaning over it for several seconds.

Then, unexpectedly, he darted off again at right angles, and I was on the point of cutting the corners of the route and making straight towards him when something clicked in the back of my mind and I made for the baby instead.

It wasn't possible—was it? No Bear could do that in cold blood. A Centaur, yes, but . . .

And he *had* done it. I could tell while I was still twenty paces away. He'd disconnected the air-cylinder on the side of the baby-carrier, and it was whistling its oxygen uselessly into nowhere, while the baby gasped and cried for breath.

I dropped on my knees with a cry, hands feverish to restore the connection. It was too late already. The valve was open to its fullest extent, and since it had been designed to feed the contents into the carrier against a normal pressure of zero Earthside feet the few moments since it had been exposed to Martian pressure of a hundred thousand had sufficed to drain the entire contents.

I stared bleakly at the child's contorted face under the trans-

parent cover of the carrier. Through smeared condensation I could see he was panting furiously. There was enough oxygen in the carrier to sustain him a little longer, but these things were bulky enough already, and waste space was reduced to a minimum.

There was only one thing to do, and I did it almost without thinking. I closed the valve of my own mask's cylinder after taking several deep breaths, disconnected it, and coupled it awkwardly to the hose dangling from the carrier. The fittings, of course, were standardized, but they seemed to resent being screwed together; my head was swimming before I could open the valve again.

I looked to see how the baby's breathing had eased, my eyes blurred. I glanced around me once, seeing that Jives had circled back towards the ridiculous gaudy domes of the college, that even yet no one else had had time to mask up and emerge from there in pursuit of me, that the car with Peter and Lilith was stopping to pick up Jives and get him away...

Then I put myself into contracted time, and the whole world melted in a blur of redness.

Chapter 21

I wasn't sure I was going to come back from that zone of distorted time. Later, often, I wished that I need not, but could rest

for eternity in a blanket of silence. For I returned to nausea, pain, a delirious chaos of mental images into which occasionally broke real events that I could not isolate and recognize. Sometimes I thought that I myself was a child again, trapped and struggling for breath—this might have been the memory of a trauma I'd actually experienced when I was being accustomed to Martian standard air after leaving the clinic where I was born. Then, of course, I was sure I'd failed in my attempt to save the baby's life, that my clumsy fingers had misconnected the air-cylinder or that I'd blacked out before I could open the valve. If that were so I didn't want to come back to awareness and face my shame.

Abruptly it was all over, and I was weak but whole, lying in a quiet twilit room surrounded by bouquets of sandflowers in protected vases, against each of which lay little white card. The first thing I saw clearly when I awoke from my final feverish slumber was such a card, and on it I read:

*To Ray in sincere admiration.
Yetta.*

I rolled my head, and there was an Earthside girl, rather fat, in a nurse's uniform. She smiled and asked how I felt and inspected some instruments connected to my wrists and temples by fine wires, and said I was going to get better very quickly now.

But beyond assuring me that the baby had survived, she wouldn't tell me any of the things I wanted to know. I lay fretting until I drifted into sleep again.

The first visitor I was allowed to receive, the first person of whom I could demand information, was Lugath, and he had changed. Gone were the last traces of his Centaur stiffness; he wore mismatched casual clothes and he'd let his hair grow out of its Centaur officer's crop. He looked ill at ease notwithstanding, as if some basic prop had been withdrawn from his life.

I plied him with questions, and he responded absently.

"Oh—yes, it all seems to have gone as you planned. Jives? They're going to try him for attempted murder, and pro-Bear sentiment has gone down all over the Old System, not only on Mars. Nizam and his girl friend? Oh, apparently the pro-Bear organization which they were working for has had such a rash of resignations it's likely to go bankrupt, and I don't know what's become of them. They hadn't done anything criminal, of course, so . . .

"Housk? It's because of him, they tell me, that Yetta couldn't stay here until you recovered. She wanted to, I gather, but she had this blazing row with her uncle over the way we were treating a helpless baby, and—

you know something? I think she was right. She was throwing all Thoder's own precepts at him, in private of course because it would have ruined the impact of public sympathy which your picture of him as a wronged grandparent generated . . .

"But I was telling you about Housk. She had to go back to Pegasus and clear up the mess there. Her chief—Dr. Snell—seems to be a tough character, and apparently there was some real ill-feeling among the Martians on the staff of his clinic, so it wasn't just a matter of turning Housk back to his own people and letting them deal with him. There's an interstellar diplomatic crisis boiling out of it. But it'll pass, I guess. She took the kid with her, by the way; declared she was better fitted to look after him than Thoder, and of course she was right. One of the finest maternity clinics on Mars, they say . . .

"The Old Temple? Yes, of course it was because Housk was sneering at it that the Martian staff of the clinic got so angry. I'd never realized how much it meant to you people, but obviously it meant enough for people not to want to ask awkward questions about it. It's been a sort of fairy story, hasn't it? Like—what the hell did they call him?—Santa Claus. And his reindeer! I'm almost beginning to share their feelings myself, these days.

"Hadn't you realized? Ray, I'm sorry! I'd have thought you would already have caught on. I'm going to have to settle in the Old System permanently. I can't go back to flying space, and that's been my life. The Bears won't have me, because they know perfectly well I wasn't a Bear agent even if the Centaurs think I was, and naturally since the Centaurs do think so, they won't have me either. I'm *persona non grata* on every human planet north and south of the Old System, and so, incidentally, are you.

"But you're lucky. At least you do have a home world to come back to. Do you realize I haven't set foot on Earth in thirty-two years? How much of a home does that make it for me? And yet I guess it's not much of a price to pay, if we can bring up that kid and his kids in their turn to disregard unimportant labels like Centaur and Bear and Earthsider and Martian . . .

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to break the truth to you, but I honestly did think you'd realized already!"

I should have done, of course. In my weakened state I railed against it, though. Oh, there were ships under Earth registry as well as Centaur and Bear—I could work for an Earthside line and still fly space. But the only planets I'd be allowed to move about on would be Earth and Mars,

and everywhere else I'd be refused permission to land. What use was a life like that? So my career was gone.

In its place—what? A drab deadened existence like my father's? My eyes roved the little cards on the bouquets of flowers, in the hope that they would cheer me up. All kinds of people had apparently been impressed by what I'd done, in the distorted form in which it was circulated, some of whom I'd never heard of, some of whom I wouldn't have expected to take the trouble. Gus Quaison, for example.

And my father. Must go see him. No more thinking that Thoder was my effective father. After all, he'd revealed himself without realizing as just as much of a prisoner of circumstances as anyone else. All humans had to admit that.

When Thoder did come to see me, I didn't give him a very warm welcome. He sensed my resentment and sat down in silence facing the bed, as if put out by the reception he was having.

I let him wonder at it until he decided to speak first.

"Ray, are you holding some grudge against me? Is it because of what Lugath told you? He said you didn't seem to realize that because of this affair neither you nor he nor any others of his crew will be permitted to—"

"No, it's not that. Or that

doesn't account for very much of it." I passed a weary hand over my eyes. "I've been lying here and thinking, and I've come to a conclusion. I think the same way Yetta does about people who treat a living human child as a sort of gaming-chip."

He hesitated. At length he said, "But reflect a little further, Ray. Do you resent being a Martian?"

"Hell, no. And I think I have rational grounds for being proud that I am!"

"Yet you were deliberately made into a Martian, long before you were born. The shape of Martian society was planned for. The things you're proud of—honor, traditional ways of behavior—weren't randomly evolved, but part of a grand blueprint for human evolution."

"Maybe that was the bit that came out all right. The rest—" I made a face. "Bears? I thought they were pretty good people, but Jives is a Bear and he was capable of turning off a baby's oxygen for no better reason than that he knew Centaurs were keen to reclaim him. Earthsiders? Peter and Lilith are Earthsiders, and they were willing to kidnap and smuggle away the child. Centaurs reek in everybody's nostrils and when you come down to it there are Martians who are willing to let their own granddaughters—"

"Ray!" In abrupt anger, Thoder leaned forward. "You accused

me of being blinded by my Martian conditioning into clinging to secrecy when I could have relied on public sympathy and—and hit on your own solution to our problem. I admitted the charge. I'm now bringing it against you in your turn. Haven't you lived a casual, easy-going, *immoral* life during stopovers on Bear planets? Haven't you enjoyed plenty of girls without calling them harsh names? Shilene is a grown woman in a child's body, consciously dedicated to a scheme she will never see bear fruit. If I hadn't believed this was how it would turn out, do you think I'd have let her be caught up in it?

"Yetta informs me that when Housk taunted Martians for believing in the reality of the Old Temple as a native relic you described in a flash of insight the purpose it served for us—the noble lie, the splended myth which everyone realizes is true on a symbolic level. You said your Martian ancestors were willing to die billions of miles from home for the sake of their children's children. Are you going to mock someone who's doing the same, because it so happens she has to choose a different *kind* of dedication? And because it infringes your narrow-minded Martian double standards?"

I couldn't answer. He gave me a chance to speak, then continued. "We were talking about aims and

ideals, weren't we? About human destiny? You said you accepted that each generation had to select its own version and be prepared to see the next generation revise it. Well, the same damned thing applies to the ethics which reflect the ideal. I wish it didn't. I wish I was primitive enough to accept some kind of revelatory dogma and shut up. But for all that we graph 'progress' in terms of starships and mental patients, we're tied to the assumption that we aren't shut in an enclosed cycle which repeats and repeats and drags us helplessly up and down forever, but at worst in a sort of maze, which may have a way out and certainly has paths in it that we haven't yet traversed. If for no more valid reason than that—well—that it makes a change of scenery and saves us from boredom, I like it better the second way. And when we get to the point at which we can't discover a new turning to explore, then what else are we to do if not create the sort of human beings who *will* be able to?"

After a pause, I said, "Yes. Maybe. Oh, I guess you're right. But meantime I have a life of my own to live, and I don't know what to do with it now my ca-

reer's gone and I can't return to space. Which is why I'm snapping at you."

Thoder hesitated. He said finally, "I mentioned this to Yetta, who's at least as remarkable a person as anyone else in my family. And I'll tell you what she said.

"She said, 'Go back to space? Do you think he's want to? Now he knows all the things you've told him, don't you expect that he'll want a part of it, starting with what comes to hand in the shape of this kid likely to grow into a man who will change history?' I shan't live forever, Ray. And as a very apt pupil of mine, I imagine you may feel that some of the things I've tried to teach you ought to form part of the boy's education. I don't know anyone who's applied my precepts more successfully, and that's the truth . . .'"

He rose, smiling. "Think it over," he said. "And when you make your mind up, tell Yetta, will you? She seemed rather—ah—eager to have her idea confirmed."

So I did.

And she was.

The End

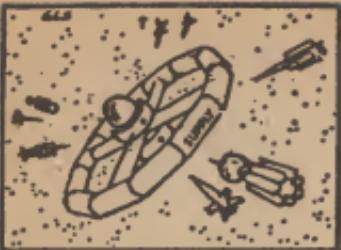
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